# THE FIRE WOMAN

W·P·LAWSON

Eleanor Toor

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# *The* FIRE WOMAN

*By*

WILLIAM PINKNEY LAWSON

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To
VERA BARSTOW LAWSON

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## CHAPTER I

### PENITENTES

All day Claire Innes and her guide had been following the valley of the Rio Grande, eyes on the far mountains to the north which were their goal. Toward evening they turned their horses' heads northeastward and began the climb through foothills to the mesa country. They topped the last ridge at length: Truchas and Truchas Peak appeared ahead, sharp in the clear air of that high altitude.

The girl checked her mount abruptly and gazed for a space at the gorgeous panorama spread out before her.

"It's marvellous!" she exclaimed. "I never dreamed that it could be so beautiful!"

She felt repaid already for the long ride from Santa Fé. She was an artist—dealt in such insubstantial things as scenery. What mattered fatigue, the hazards of the trail, when such a vision met her at the end? She felt that she could be content to stay here always, end her days amid surroundings such as these.

Truchas, the town, nestled against a shoulder of the hills confidingly, like a toy village in its tremendous

setting. Light from the late sun gleamed on its clustering adobe houses, touched the spire and white surmounting cross of its little church with a warm gleam. Here and there in the narrow streets moved black-shawled women. On the outskirts, where fields were, a line of cattle followed by a slouching horseman with a dog wound slowly home. No slightest sound reached across the mile-wide gap between. In the soft dusk it seemed a spectral village—a mirage.

To the left the mesa shelf broke away sharply in a welter of hills and canyons that stopped at the Rio Grande valley, now thousands of feet below. To the right, beyond the level plateau, the Sangre de Christo range stretched north and south as far as one could see. Sheer from the town's farther edge rose Truchas Peak, gaunt and grim, bare above timber line, thrusting its snow-crowned head full fourteen thousand feet toward the sky. On its broad rock face two gigantic fissures, cruciform in shape, were cut as if by an elemental hand. And though shadows had begun to obscure the town the great cross still stood forth boldly, gilded by the sun.

The girl's eyes clung to it lingeringly.

"That's Truchas Cross, I suppose!" she murmured. "It seems almost as if God must have set it there, doesn't it?"

Her companion's eyes—black slits in a brown face—were fixed upon her enigmatically.

"So the folk of Truchas think, Señorita! It is to them a sign set there by God—a symbol of His strong protection."

She turned, staring at the speaker. His manner, though lacking no whit in respect, she felt had subtly altered with the low-spoken words. There was in his voice a reticence, a veiled significance recalling her past in some vague yet poignant way. For the first time during the trip she envisaged him with conscious interest, saw him not merely as a guide but as a man.

He was young, broad-shouldered and straight, with a face frank and pleasing save for a disfiguring scar that ran slantingly across one cheek, and a habit of gazing sleepily through half-closed eyes. The dark eyes, coffee-hued complexion and straight black hair betrayed his race. Indeed, he had come but recently from Mexico and spoke English poorly; enough, however, to have secured a fire guard's job with the Forest Service, attached to the Truchas district. This much the forest supervisor at Santa Fé, to whom Claire had applied for aid in reaching her destination, had told her. The man's name, as it had been given her, was Ricardo Quintana.

He met her curious glance fairly, and said with a faint smile:

"To you, Señorita, the Cross perhaps is but a detail of the landscape. . . . You will paint it?"

She thought she detected irony in the speech. Her face grew instantly cold.

"Why not? . . . Though, to be sure, my forte is painting portraits."

The momentary touch of hauteur gave her an added charm—though without this she was beautiful enough. A vivid blonde with cheeks red and white, hair of pale

gold, blue eyes with fire in their depths, she was small but daintily formed; vital and well-poised. In her boyish knickers and straight linen coat she made a picture more worthy of preservation, one might have judged, than any item of the local genre.

If such a thought lodged in the mind of her companion his face did not betray it. His eyes were sombre, his smile grim as he replied:

"Portraits—in Truchas? It is in my mind, Señorita, that you will paint few portraits here!"

The girl's eyebrows rose.

"You mean?"

"I mean," he returned slowly, "that there are those who would object. . . . Have you heard nothing of the Penitentes?"

Claire hesitated before answering. She had, in truth, been told something of this fanatic sect, an order deplored officially by the Church but tolerated perforce in primitive Spanish-American communities. She had heard tales of bloody rites, of oaths sworn in secret conclave, of meetings held by night on lonely hills or in some hidden *morada,* of punishments swift and cruel visited on those who would betray their vows. In town these tales had seemed apocryphal. Now in the eerie dusk, in the shadow of the wild hills, such madnesses were credible.

The Mexican was speaking once more, with slow insistence:

"To the Penitentes, Señorita, such painting as you plan is blasphemy. . . . I would but warn you of a peril!"

Claire shivered. It seemed to her that a sudden cold wind from the peaks had blown across her face. . . . Then courage returned; her small chin set firmly.

She shook her pony's reins and drove him forward on the trail.

"I have come here to paint, and paint I shall! Nothing shall stop me. As for these Penitentes——"

She ceased abruptly at a low exclamation from her guide, who sat in an attitude of listening. His glance plumbed the dark chasm to their left.

"Hark, Señorita!"

From the canyon's depths rose a slow, mournful chant. Claire peered over the rim—descried a row of figures naked to the waist winding along the canyon bed. Her eyes grew wide as she perceived their occupation: each swung a stout whip to the cadence of the chant, lashing the bare back of his file-leader till the blood ran in streams. The foremost one of all carried no whip but bore on his shoulders a heavy wooden cross. He was bent over by his burden and swayed as he walked.

Quintana had leaned quickly and caught the girl's reins near the bit; he was edging away from the rim, to the other side of the road.

"Let them not see us spying, Señorita—it is unwise to be detected thus!"

She stared at him unseeingly. What she had witnessed seemed to her incredible—a monstrous anachronism in twentieth-century America. It was as if she had slipped suddenly back into the Middle Ages, into the days of the Flagellants. These wretched crea-

tures were still living in that bygone age; had never outgrown the childhood of the mind! For three centuries since the coming of the Spaniards and their gloomy priests these zealots, product of the Indian and the conqueror blood, had dwelt here in utter isolation, untouched by progress, enslaved by ignorance and superstition. They were but woeful survivals of a dead past; Truchas itself was a relic, a vestige of the medieval scene. . . .

A sharp gesture from her companion caught her eye; she saw him gazing apprehensively ahead. Two men hidden before by brush along the rim were visible, not ten yards distant. The younger of the two sat astride a horse, the other stood at his stirrup. Both were leaning forward, gazing with complete absorption at the procession in the canyon depths.

Even in that tense moment Claire could not restrain a stir of pleasure at sight of the horseman—at the unconscious grace of his pose, the slender, well-proportioned figure set off by his costume of a vaquero, the perfect profile beneath the broad sombrero with its leather strap under the chin. So marked an impression did he make upon her that for the moment she scarcely glanced at his companion, an older man in the black robe and flat-crowned hat of the priest.

One ear of the youth's pony was reversed and turned slowly with the approach of the two along the road. As they drew abreast the half-broken animal started and whirled rearing, his eyes rolling fearfully, his slim forefeet pawing the air.

His rider, though taken unaware, did not so much

as budge in the saddle but checked his mount's frenzy with a wrist of steel, his face impassive, his glance on the travellers whom he saw now, apparently, for the first time.

With a sweeping gesture he doffed his wide-brimmed hat and bowed low, murmuring:

*"Buenos tardes, Señorita! Y Ricardo Quintana!"*

Ricardo's lips opened for reply, but the girl was before him. A flash of interest showed in the vaquero's eyes as she said in purest Spanish:

*"Buenos tardes, Señors!"*

The youth bowed once more, lower than at first. The priest glanced sharply at the fair speaker. She had ignored him before; now he riveted her attention. It had seemed to her that his companion had the look of an eagle—intrepid, frankly proud. The smooth golden-brown of the youth's cheeks was unmarked by the pencil of time. But the old man's cheeks were graven deep with traces of extinct passions. His look was keen: one saw that in his soul patience matched resolution, discretion tempered both.

What types! thought Claire excitedly. Her hands itched to get them down. Was it indeed true, she wondered, that the Penitentes would ban painters and their art? If so, were the two whom she had encountered bound by the prejudices of the sect?

"You know those men?" she asked of her companion when they had passed on.

Ricardo nodded shortly.

"All in Truchas know them, Señorita! The one in the priest's hat and cassock is Father Felipe. The

youth is Don Ramon de Vargas, a true hidalgo—though his title indeed has lapsed. His hacienda, El Rancho del Oro, cuts fifty miles and more from the Government reserve—a royal grant from Spain's king to his ancestor the famous conquistador. None richer nor of a purer strain than he in all the region!"

"And are they—Penitentes?"

Ricardo frowned, glancing anxiously behind him.

"The priest, I am told, is hostile to the order—the youth also, if rumor does not lie. . . . But have a care, I pray you, Señorita, how you speak of the dark brethren—and to whom. They are not friendly to the stranger, at best. To one who evinces curiosity in regard to the society they are without ruth."

Claire scarcely heard his muttered words. Her eyes were on the scene ahead. The sun had sunk and a warm afterglow lay on the summit of the hills—that crimson tint which long ago moved early explorers to name the range Sangre de Christo.

As she gazed Truchas Cross gleamed for an instant red as blood, then the light faded slowly along the peaks. Night swooped down. The great stars in the sky and the twinkling lights of the little town beneath grew sharper and brighter than before.

"There, Señorita, is the mission," came the whispering voice of Ricardo Quintana; "you will be glad of a rest, is it not so?"

## CHAPTER II

### RAMON'S CHOICE

During her encounter with the two watchers by the canyon rim Claire had surprised on the smooth features of the younger nothing more flattering than a momentary flash of interest at her unexpected use of Spanish. No sooner had she passed, however, than the impersonal look left the vaquero's face; his eyes grew lively with curiosity, a reluctant admiration, a faint trace of disdain.

"The young Americano is pleasing to view," he observed, "but her garb of a man—what gross immodesty!"

Father Felipe's stern visage retained its normal impassivity.

"The costume is indeed of a lamentable impudence," he agreed. "As for the stranger's beauty, is she more winsome, think you, than the daughter of Montoya?"

The youth's olive cheeks flushed.

"The Señorita Dolores is without peer—in looks no less than in the sweet savor of piety which rises to heaven from her innocence. It is to ask her hand of Don Tomaso that I have come hither today—on the birthday of the Señorita."

His companion eyed him calmly.

"Is it so, my son? Yet on at least two preceding birthdays of the maiden, as I recall, have you proffered an alliance with Montoya——"

"Dolores is sixteen today. High time for her betrothal, Father!"

"You have hopes, then?"

"Hopes—yes," said the youth hesitantly, "but no assurance of felicity. Don Tomaso is stubborn—none more so. The society——"

He shrugged and stared absently down the canyon where the last of the Penitentes, whip swinging wearily, was lost to sight in the shadows of the lower gorge. The wailing chant was still faintly audible, grim, despairing, full of an inextinguishable melancholy.

"He would have you join the brotherhood?" prompted the priest softly.

"It is what I fear—though not yet has Don Tomaso made the wish manifest."

"If it be indeed his wish—you will yield?"

The boy glanced up in surprise.

"Do you ask me that, Father, who have so often counselled otherwise? Who have complained that the rites of the dark order are a mockery—a wile of the devil to lead men's souls astray?"

The priest laid a sinewy hand on his young friend's shoulder.

"I did but test you, my son! Sometimes the will falters, faith itself fails before the magic of a woman's face. . . . If it be a choice—Dolores or your faith?"

"If it be a choice, Father, I will stand firm. I see eye to eye with you in this matter."

Don Tomaso Montoya lay face downward on a low couch, recuperating slowly from the painful ordeal of the afternoon. His back was swollen and raw, criss-crossed with angry weals. His hawk-like features were drawn; an occasional groan escaped him. Yet for the most part he bore his pangs with fortitude. Were not his sins lessened by each sharp spasm that assailed him?

His sins, as he saw it, were heavy. Left great possessions in his youth, he had proceeded to dissipate his patrimony in wild living. His piety in those days had been of the most superficial; God got little of his wealth. Reduced to poverty and illness shortly after his broken-hearted wife died in childbirth, Montoya had turned penitent. Thereupon he retired with his young daughter to Truchas, settled in a small house with a garden on the outskirts of town, and spent the vigor of his intemperate spirit in a fanaticism as futile as it was barbarous and cruel.

The brotherhood of the Penitentes might have been established for his sole comfort, so eagerly did he embrace its hideous doctrines and bloody practices. The soul saved through mutilation of its carnal envelope was his literal belief. When in the rites his whip fell whistling on the back of his brother before him he felt as sharp an ecstasy as when the lash flayed his own twitching skin. His burden of wickedness diminished sensibly; his soul—or what he called

his soul—emerged freed from the trammels of the flesh.

Such zeal won from the fellowship its due reward; for long had he been leader of the local band. He made the aims and ends of the sect his own, identified himself wholly with its functioning. Vigilant to discover transgression, he was prompt to urge atonement according to the ritual. No greater happiness for him than to impress upon an offender the single means of his salvation, laid down immutably by the rules of the dark order.

The ceremonies of that afternoon had been most satisfying. José Candelario, a youth recently wedded, had been found in adultery and judged by the assembly of the brethren. He it was who had taken the part of the Christus in the march Claire and the ranger had witnessed, who had dragged the wooden cross miles to the spot appointed for the concluding feature of the sacrament. The cross had been erected, the sinner affixed to its timbers and left to survive the night if he could.

Watchers had been set to guard against intrusion. The others returned to their homes, singly and by secluded ways, to undergo with what fortitude they possessed the torment of their wounds. Some, it is true, were wont to ease their pain by the use of unguents; but of such Don Tomaso was not one. For hours now had he lain prone on his couch, his gaunt frame racked by suffering, pride triumphing austerely over the weakness of his body.

It was about nine o'clock when Pedro Lopez, his one-eyed servitor, entered and announced in hushed

tones that Don Ramon de Vargas would see him—was even then without.

The Penitente did not shrink from the encounter; rather did he appear to draw increase of satisfaction from this added trial. When the visitor entered he found his host seated in a straight-backed chair, erect and grim-visaged.

The meeting was formal and marked by an elaborate courtesy. Unequal as they were in fortune, antipathetic as they were by nature and conviction, neither host nor guest forgot that in the veins of both flowed the rich blood of Spain.

"You have known," began Ramon as soon as greetings were exchanged, "that for long I have wished to make the Señorita Dolores my wife?"

Don Tomaso bowed, but offered no comment.

"The Señorita is sixteen today," went on the boy; "it has occurred to me therefore that the anniversary might well be marked by our betrothal—should the alliance seem good to you."

The thin lips of the other moved:

"Upon certain previous occasions has Don Ramon honored my house with like proposals. Does he recall my answer at those times?"

"There was talk of the Señorita's youth. Yet at sixteen——!"

"The girl is of marriageable age," agreed Montoya.

Ramon's eyebrows rose.

"Is it that my birth is mean—my wealth inadequate?"

Don Tomaso bowed gravely.

"The Señor's birth is all that one could wish, his wealth more than ample. But his piety——"

He paused. The point was plain. Ramon flushed hotly.

"I am young," he burst out, "yet I have never availed myself of the leniency accorded the wild blood of youth. Another, perhaps less careful of the soul entrusted to his care, might make of a belated penitence a virtue——"

He stopped, checked by Montoya's gesture.

"Know you," said the older man with gleaming eyes, "that all are conceived and born in sin—the best even as the worst. Only the most unremitting pain, the constant maceration of the flesh, can save us from hell fires. What is a momentary twinge of agony here, to an eternity of suffering later?"

"I have followed faithfully the precepts of the Church," returned the youth. "Father Felipe——"

The other broke in contemptuously:

"An elderly female—fit to soothe ailing women! To men, the brethren of the cross minister. . . . Do you join our holy order, Don Ramon—expiate according to our rites your heritage of sin! Then—as to the girl Dolores—my blessing will not be long withheld."

He sat waiting, his eyes on the youth in a fixed, unwavering stare. Ramon's face for the moment was expressionless. What he had feared was come. Montoya had at last spoken out, had offered him Dolores if he would join the Penitentes!

"The ways of the order are not my ways," he said after a moment; "your faith is other than mine."

He made his choice unhesitatingly, perhaps because not yet would he believe that his sole hope to win the girl lay in surrender. That Don Tomaso in his poverty should spurn his wealth, the proud name he bore, seemed to him madness. He did not realize that Montoya, too, had power, wealth of a sort, pride equal to if not greater than his own.

He had no sooner spoken than the gaunt figure in the high-backed chair sprang upright. The Penitente's cotton shirt was rent from neck to waist. With trembling fingers the old man pointed to his scarred and bleeding back.

"Behold," he cried terribly, "that which alone avails to wipe out sin—the torture of the flesh! Think you your blood can match this blood that I have sacrificed to God? Think you your wealth can match the wealth of suffering I bear to prove my faith? . . . No—no, de Vargas! Dedicate your goods to the order, sacrifice upon its altars: then will I deem—and not till then—the alliance of our houses fitting!"

Ramon's last hope vanished. Anger rose in him to take its place. He permitted something of the rage he felt to show in his face, in his harsh tones:

"Bodily torture is indeed suitable for the Indians, Don Tomaso. Their ignorance and cruelty are evidenced by rites more fit for pagans than for Christian souls. But that a Spanish gentleman should sink to this incongruous barbarity——!"

He shrugged and turned as if to leave, but Montoya with livid face barred the way.

"Coward!" he hissed, "it is your body's health you foster—not your soul's!"

The youth stiffened at the insult; his teeth showed, almost in a snarl. For a moment he hung on the threshold of assault, then caught himself up sharply, his cheeks pale.

"I am your guest, Don Tomaso," he said haughtily; "do you not overlook the fact?"

The spare form of the other relaxed; he passed a hand quickly across his brow.

He stood erect, with a great effort at composure.

"Depart in peace, Don Ramon!" he breathed. "But do not come this way again. It is not well that you and I should meet."

Bowing gravely, the visitor left the room and the house. To the giant Indian who held his horse he said curtly:

"To the mission school, Juan—keep in the shadows as we ride!"

## CHAPTER III

### LOST FAITH

Isabel Otero sat motionless before a small wood fire, her hands folded in her lap. The light of the flames played on her short, thick-waisted figure and round face insignificant save for the eyes which were large and brown and full of a transparent earnestness. She was outwardly placid, but her inner excitement grew as the hour at which she might expect her friend approached.

Her one-time intimacy with Claire Innes had been perhaps the most thrilling experience of her life. That the friendship bade fair to be renewed after five years of discontinuance seemed to her a chance approaching the miraculous; yet her anticipatory pleasure was spiced faintly with anxiety. She herself had not changed—not greatly—during the interval. But how had time served Claire, who was always changing, who was never the same twice? What had five years done to that intrepid youthful soul?

They had been bosom friends at the convent near Seville where they had gone to school. Their very dissimilarities, physical and temperamental, had seemed to bring them together. Isabel had been dark

and plain, naturally devout, conventional in her adherence to the forms and precepts of her religion. Claire, blonde and even then strikingly beautiful, had been first and last an individualist—which in the circumstances was to say a rebel. The despair of the nuns whose care she was, she yet retained their respect by her naïf courage, her candor, the passionate eagerness with which she espoused forlorn causes, hated what she deemed injustice, insisted upon the right to guide her own small craft among the deeps and shallows of experience. Her soul the good sisters prayed for; her heart, that erring member, they pitied and for her sake feared.

Recalling those vanished days, Isabel smiled softly to herself. Though older by two years she had in most things been as wax in the hands of her volatile companion. What escapades had she not shared, protesting but swept along by the other's energy and daring! What feverish succeeding penances and self-reproaches! She had known tortures of abasement from the nuns' censure, from penalties imposed—but Claire had taken all lightly as it came, bitter with sweet, secure it seemed in her conviction of the right to self-tuition. One thing only had touched her: when they had stopped her drawing, locked up the tools of her beloved craft —she had been desolate then.

The girl's single unswerving loyalty in those days, Isabel recalled, had been to art. Already she had resolved to become a famous painter; and somehow this ambition was entangled with the theories of conduct she professed—and tried to practise. Isabel re-

membered vividly their last real talk, and the lingering impression it had made upon her.

They were seated on a shady bench in the arbor behind the convent buildings. The sun was warm, drowsy insects blundered about. Claire was expounding her views eagerly while her companion listened in shocked fascination.

"An artist," the younger girl was saying solemnly, "must know life. And I intend to be an artist—a great artist!"

"But what," objected her logical elder, "has that to do with your breaking bounds yesterday, going to the fruit-seller's in the plaza——"

"Why, it's the principle—don't you see? How can one learn aught of life shut up as we are, warned constantly against indulging one's natural impulses and desires——"

"But we must control our impulses, conquer our desires—that is to be holy! As for knowing life, surely the sisters are not ignorant: do they not tell us much of the world's pitfalls—its many evils?"

"Poof!" scoffed Claire impatiently, "they've heard and read of life, no doubt, but they've never really lived themselves. To learn deeply of life one must know it at first hand—mix with humanity, suffer the common lot with its joys and sorrows, loving, striving—sinning perhaps!"

"But—" began Isabel uncomfortably, and ceased as her companion, carried away by her own eloquence, pressed a hand to her heart and said quickly:

"How have I learned these truths, when the nuns

teach us otherwise? I feel them—here! And I trust my feelings—has not God made me thus?"

"It is Satan prompts you, doubtless," suggested her friend with gloomy interest.

The heretic pondered the thought briefly, then shrugged.

"Well, and if it is Satan—that would be God indirectly, would it not? For He made Satan as He made you and me, with a purpose in each instance. Yet how can one know His purpose save by the faculties He lends us—our minds, our instincts, our emotions——"

"And faith, foolish one," sounded a bell-like voice, "where then does faith enter? Faith in God's word revealed to sinful men—faith in the wisdom of the sisterhood, in the authority of Holy Church?"

Isabel wilted instantly, her dark face bloodless. Even Claire winced at sight of the dreaded Mother Superior who had drawn near unnoted; but she was not wholly silenced.

"I have faith in God's goodness, Reverend Mother," she said slowly. "Would he make of life—the life that I feel in my veins—a lie?"

Isabel stared aghast. A faint flush appeared in the nun's cheeks, her brow clouded.

But she said only:

"A letter has come, Child—a letter from your father. He wishes you to start home—for America—at once."

That had been all. Yet Isabel shivered still at the

recollection of the old contretemps. Not yet had she forgotten her own panic fear, her surprise at the incredible assurance of her friend. Claire had been brave—ah, yes—but had her courage lasted? How had life dealt with her who had sought life so eagerly —who would know life?

A sound of hoofs outside struck suddenly on Isabel's ear. Next moment the two girls, so different and yet so closely bound by ties of love and memory, were in each other's arms.

"Claire—you have come!"

"Isabel, dear! It's nice, so nice to see you!"

With her first glance Isabel decided that her friend had changed little if at all, at least outwardly. There was the same enchanting coronal of pale gold hair, the same piquant features, the same deep blue eyes. Yet in the eyes, as she looked closer, the elder thought she saw a shadow that she did not remember; about the lips a trace of gravity. Was it fancy only which convinced her that Claire had by now learned of life, as she once so greatly desired—and that the knowledge did not altogether please her?

No hint of the fact—if fact it was—appeared in the visitor's manner. On entering she had glanced quickly round the low-ceilinged room with its white-washed walls, its few books and pictures, its adobe fireplace in which juniper sticks burned briskly; then she turned to Isabel.

"You're not a bit different. You might still be seventeen as when we parted, instead of—what is it?—twenty-two?"

Isabel merely smiled.

"I'll show you your room before we dine—Dolores will see to the meal."

"Dolores?" exclaimed Claire, struck by the romantic name.

Isabel nodded.

"Dolores Montoya, who assists me with the work of the school. She is my good friend, of the pure Spanish blood—though her house has fallen upon evil days."

She stopped as the door came open slowly and a young girl simply clad in black stood upon the threshold.

Claire started and caught her breath. Never, she thought, had she seen so appealing a face and figure—so perfect an example of the Madonna type.

The girl, obviously a mere child in years, was yet fully matured physically; her straight dress revealed charms ripened early by the southern sun and the warm Spanish blood that filled her veins. The pure lines of her face, the pale ivory cheeks and demure mouth were in striking contrast to the swelling breast, the soft voluptuousness of her form. Her black hair, parted in the middle, was worn close to the small head, covering ears and temples like a sable casque. Her eyes, dark and shadowed by their lashes, stared gravely from beneath pencilled brows. There was on the face, touched by an expression of faint melancholy, a look of dignity that seemed somehow anomalous—and yet wholly natural.

"Dolores, dear!" said Isabel, "this is my friend

Miss Innes, of whom I have told you. She will stay with us—for long, I hope!"

The girl curtsied. A slow smile curved her lips. It was as if a statue had come suddenly to life.

"Welcome, Señorita!" she murmured in a low contralto, "the friend of my friend is welcome!"

Supper over, and Dolores busied herself with certain indecipherable documents in the schoolroom—aftermath of the day's classes she had held. Claire and Isabel sat in the room with the fire, renewing the threads of former intimacy.

Isabel was speaking in her flat, rather monotonous voice:

"Little has happened to me since we parted in Spain, Claire—little of interest. Perhaps if I had stayed longer with the sisters I would have joined their order—sometimes I felt that I had a vocation. But I left, as it happened, not long after you—the time your father sent for you, do you remember?"

Claire nodded, staring into the fire. Did she not remember that time—her first plunge into life—a time of disillusion?

Her friend's voice droned on:

"My family in Las Vegas had suffered reverses. The Oteros are proud—my father, Don Guadalupe, is very proud; though in affairs a child. The nuns would have kept me—they said as much, but my father would not have it so. I was recalled. Later there was the chance for me to come here to Truchas, to open the

mission school. It seemed the hand of God. . . . It is God's work, truly—and I am not unhappy."

Claire's eyes were on her, questioning.

"And love—the love of men?"

Isabel's unlovely face contracted sharply, her eyes dropped. But almost at once she raised them.

"Such love is not for me." She crossed herself devoutly. "I am content in the love of God, and of the Blessed Mary!"

For a space there was silence. Claire's face, though touched by firelight, was still and cold; her eyes were brooding.

"And you?" murmured her friend. "How have you fared, Claire? You who were to be an artist, and know life?"

The younger girl stretched her long fingers toward the blaze. A little crooked smile came to her lips. The shadow in her eyes seemed to have deepened.

"I have done well with my art. I am becoming recognized. I too should be content."

"And you are not?"

Claire broke out sharply:

"Oh, Isabel—I wanted to know life: I know too much of life. . . . I have lost faith!"

The dark girl's hands tightened spasmodically; she slipped from her chair and sank to her knees by her friend's side.

"Ah! that you should lose faith—that is terrible! Poor Claire, how you must have suffered!"

Claire's eyes were gentle but her mouth had hardened. There was pain in her wry smile.

"There are compensations, dear! Never again will I walk the road that I walked once. I am prepared—armed against life: and that is much."

"But your faith!" Her friend's voice was urgent. "That you must regain. To have faith—that is to be safe for all eternity!"

The younger girl frowned and shook her head slowly.

"Keep your faith, Isabel, since it suffices you. As for me, I have my courage—the solace of my paint and brushes." Her eyes grew steady, her small chin was resolute. "I have done good work, but I can do better still. Perhaps—who knows—I may yet be a great painter." Her frown faded, she smiled at a sudden thought. The face and form of the youth, de Vargas, had come into her mind. "Perhaps here in Truchas I will find the inspiration that I seek—perhaps here I will paint my masterpiece!"

## CHAPTER IV

### A GHOSTLY VISITOR

LATER, from her bedroom window, Claire looked out at a night full of giant stars. The stars here seemed larger and infinitely brighter than she had ever known them. Through the thin air of the high plateau their light shone unobstructed. Truchas Peak with the huge cross graven dark upon it loomed mistily white; shadows in the narrow street before the mission school were striped with a silver radiance. The gorges were black haunts of mystery.

She knelt by the window resting her arms upon the sill, her chin upon her arms. As she knelt thus the spirit of the place seemed to emerge, to creep close and touch her with friendly fingers, whispering of strange uncommon things, of new and sharp experiences awaiting her beyond the threshold of the present hour. It wrought in her a keen excitement—yet she was conscious of apprehension also. She feared this unexplained emotion; was wary of the loosened grip of will. Once in days past she had trusted to the guidance of her heart: that once, in her judgment, was enough.

The memory of that early disillusion still chilled her, still caused her pain. Her talk with Isabel had brought the memory strongly back, revivified the past. The

past haunted her now; it seemed to walk abroad in the still night. It was as if for a space she were again the girl she had once been; eager for love, full of courage and desire, of longing for experience of life. This notwithstanding that she knew that younger self had died, slain by a bitter knowledge of reality.

The end of Claire's childhood was foreshadowed by the summons from her father that called her from her cloistered life among the nuns—though she did not, of course, realize this at the time. It had seemed to her at the time merely a release, an end to a long term of waiting for real life to begin.

So too the journey overseas had seemed to her wonderful, an epochal event. The people that she met on the boat were drawn from the pages of romance; it was a fairyland she dwelt in for the duration of the voyage.

There was a Prince—a young American named Richard Warren—who took the girl's heart by storm. She liked his name, liked his pale aristocratic face, his hair as fair almost as her own, his wide-open, frank eyes—even the small mustache he fingered so devoutly. When he spoke in his clear, resonant voice she was thrilled by the mere sound. When on their first night at sea he made love to her in the shadow of a life boat her cup of joy was full. She yielded without a struggle; their troth was plighted. A silly, schoolgirlish proceeding in retrospect; yet at the time, as Claire remembered well, a dream of Paradise!

For the remainder of the passage the two were inseparable. The girl was in the seventh heaven; life

was beautiful—was always to be beautiful. Nothing could touch her now, not sin nor sorrow, not even the icy hand of actuality. One thing only marred her perfect bliss. She had not seen her father for years, not since her mother's death when she had gone abroad; but he had always been kind to her, indulgent even. Her thought was to tell him the good news at once. She was sure that he would rejoice with her in her new happiness, would confirm her engagement and speed the inevitable union with young Warren.

This plan, her lover told her, must be put out of mind. He had returned from abroad, he explained, on account of the critical illness of his mother; he could not postpone for an hour hastening to her side. His home was in a Western city; he must go straight from the dock to a waiting train. Later he would return and claim her—could not the announcement of their engagement wait that time? If not, would she not tell the story to her father, arrange with him to do what seemed best to them both in the matter?

The illness of his mother roused Claire's sympathy; she hid her own disappointment, agreed that in the circumstances it would be best to keep their romance secret till the outcome was known, till he could return and meet her father freed from the burden of his present anxiety. In brief, she trusted him implicitly. He left her at the dock, in tears, promising to write, leaving his home address where she could reach him. She went home to her father, wrote to her lover that same night of her unexampled bliss.

She wrote daily but received no answering word.

Surprise gave way to dismay, dismay to consternation. Frantic telegrams availed as little as the post. Desperate, finally, she confided the perplexing situation to her father.

Sloane Innes was a handsome, soft-spoken man with the manners of a courtier and the heart of a stone image. Despite his kindly ways he thought of his only child less as a daughter than as an asset whereby to recoup his shattered fortunes. Wealthy once, extravagance had left him stripped—yet he lived still as if the riches of the Indies were his to command. As a matter of cold fact he had come to the end of his rope some months before—was living now on the capital of a trust fund he held for the family of a dead friend. Even this source of income was dwindling; exposure had become imminent. His craft showed him no safe way of exit from his dilemma save by marrying his daughter to one who would reward the personable gift with generosity.

Such a prospect he had found, he thought, in Vinton Walsh, a middle-aged rake and crony of his own, rich to repletion and not averse to wedding youth and beauty as spurs to his jaded appetite. He recalled Claire as a child—one glimpse of her on her return made him her willing slave, made him her father's tool. He helped his friend in his immediate difficulties, promised a princely settlement whenever the match proposed was consummated.

Innes would have moved at once, so pressed was he, but the unforeseen infatuation of his daughter for young Warren—which he had discovered promptly on

her return by confiscating and reading her first love letter, entrusted to a footman to post—made haste seem inadvisable. He contented himself therefore for a time with intercepting incoming and outgoing communications between the two young people, and trusted to time and disappointment to effect an alteration in Claire's mind. He was rewarded by her eventual confidence, her appeal to his maturer judgment in her unhappy case.

He took her grief at her lover's defection seriously —or so it seemed to her; counselling courage, naming pride as an antidote to faith betrayed. Men, he averred, were incorrigible philanderers—young men especially. Doubtless her cavalier had but trifled with her affections, flirted to while away the tedium of the week's sea voyage. She must forget him, seek to find a safer incidence for her emotions. He wrote Warren in his own name stating that his daughter had experienced a change of heart, had gone South for the winter. Letters on both sides ceased.

He waited for a time till he thought the moment ripe, then revealed the reason, as he gave it, for his calling the girl home from the convent. There was a heart affection, he said; he might drop dead at any time. His affairs were not as prosperous as he could have wished. Therefore he wished to see his daughter established in life before his death. He had arranged a suitable match for her, but had left it in abeyance till she had recovered from the shock of her first abortive venture in love's lists.

When she asked whom he had selected he was

prompt to answer. Who but their good friend Walsh, a man well on in years, it was true, but by that the more worthy mate for a young girl left without natural protectors.

Claire negatived the proposal indignantly at first, but second thoughts placed it in a more favorable light. Her father, she could see with half an eye, had set his heart on the fulfillment of the project: she owed him much. Her own unhappy experience had made her diffident of her ability to chart her course unaided. She had seen Walsh rarely, then only under the most auspicious circumstances. He seemed good and kind; marriage to him she thought would prove at least a passport to safety, a shield to guard her from the worst of the world's evils. Six months later she became his bride.

It will be seen that Claire was at this time ignorant of much a more worldly-minded girl would have known. She had been bruised and discomfited by her first contact with life. She had drunk suffering to the dregs, she was sure; her loveless marriage shortly undeceived her. In time, with a certainty she could not doubt, she plumbed the black depths of her husband's soul. By an accident, lucky or unlucky as one views it, knowledge came to her of the plot hatched by her father—the unholy compact which had resulted in her present situation.

This, she told herself bitterly, was the end. She said nothing: she was not for open scandal. But she packed her things quietly, turned what small property

she owned into cash, took her own name again and boarded the westbound train for Santa Fé.

She had a plan, of a sort. After her first awakening to the true nature of the contract she had signed, she had fallen back on pride, on the sheer power to endure. Her art helped her; she plunged into painting desperately, hoping by its impartial aid to wring eventual victory from defeat—to achieve a new self-conquest, acceptance of the usual facts of life at least. For months and years she fought to regain something of her early courage if not her youthful optimism.

But with the debacle following her unearthing of the deception that had been practised upon her, she determined to bear her lot no longer. She remembered Isabel Otero, her dearest friend; wrote to her at Las Vegas in New Mexico, heard from her from Truchas. She could join her in the little mountain town, her friend said, and stay there for as long as she desired. It seemed an ideal refuge, a place wherein to paint and through the solace of her art to heal her wounded spirit, to gain peace. . . .

She stirred restlessly, shifted her position slightly before the window. The night was beautiful, seemed surcharged with peace—yet it held no peace for her.

She scarcely knew herself; the moment seemed unreal and yet full of a vital significance. What spell had come upon her, she wondered; what influence pervaded her? This very evening she had boasted of her armor of experience, of her immunity to the hateful arrows of emotion. She had deemed herself cured of youth's unreasonable fever, of youth's mad hunger for

love. She had been sure that she had found life out, had armed her soul against life's blandishments by a studied cynicism, a careful coldness. Her younger self had died, she knew—yet feeling mounted in her; her heart raced into a tumult of long unfamiliar rhythms.

Was it merely the effect of the high altitude, she wondered, which she had heard sometimes stimulated one beyond one's usual mood, played queer tricks with one's nerves? Was it the unique enchantment of the place and hour, the wild, remote environment? Was it the resilience of her own nature, youth, still undefeated, surging upward ruthlessly, conquering the sober judgments of her brain?

Candidly she endeavored to examine the content of her heart. She saw the form of a young man—broad-shouldered and straight, with a face frank and pleasing save for a scar which ran slantingly across one cheek. Strange, that it should remind her of the past—of—of Dick (she made herself pronounce his name with her lips, though no sound came). Could it be possible that she still loved him after all?

Absurd! she told herself. Her affection—her infatuation rather—was a thing of the past. Ruthlessly she pushed the image from her mind, trying to summon others to take its place. A face stood out before her, a slim form filled her mind. A recollection of the young vaquero she had seen for the first time that day came, warm with the strong hues of actuality. Was this the secret of her mood? Had she heard once again despite all thoughtful obstacles the call of youth

to youth? It was not Dick, then—not the memory of her first love summoned from the past by the Mexican guide, but—this young vaquero who was the cause of her perturbation.

The discovery came upon her like a storm.

She clenched her hands, striving for self-control. Her pulses were pounding, her cheeks aflame. She knew suddenly that she was not done, as she had hoped, with love.

A bitter certitude of harm was in her mind—a premonition of impending peril. With a deep sigh she made as if to move from the magic window—then stopped abruptly, frozen into immobility.

From the shadows on which her eyes rested a cloaked figure emerged and stood motionless with uplifted head. The face was in the starlight, the dark eyes staring straight toward her.

She caught her breath sharply. The face was the face of the youth she had been dreaming of—the face of Ramon de Vargas!

## CHAPTER V

### THE BIRTHDAY OF DOLORES

DOLORES' sixteenth birthday, which fell on the day Claire Innes came to Truchas, proved memorable in many ways—though Montoya's daughter was far from suspecting as day dawned the momentous nature of gathering events. She awoke to the song of birds; sunlight flooded her tiny room. A sense of peace filled her—a deep sense of well-being. Rising quickly she fell to her knees before the image of the Virgin on the wall and sent prayers winging skyward from a full heart.

Her thoughts were vague, feeling was dominant. Yet feeling was informed and strengthened by the underlying thought of Don Ramon; for in her heart she kept a shrine as sacred and more secret than the shrine before which she knelt, where the youth's image dwelt constantly, bright-colored by her dreams.

She could not, if she would, have told truthfully just how or when that imaged dream had come into being. It seemed to her that she had always loved Ramon. Her childhood memories were full of him —his proud young face, his slim and agile body, his haughty masterful ways. Later, affection changed imperceptibly to an emotion deeper, stronger, more des-

perately exigent. The girl could not conceive of an existence separate from his.

No doubt was in her mind but that Ramon loved her as well. The customs of their race forbade open avowal of his passion till Montoya had learned of and approved the suit; but the depositions of his eyes were plain, the pledges of his tones unmistakable. Time only, felt Dolores, stood as a present bar to their desires; and patience conquers time.

So while her lips framed thanks to Holy Mary for youth, for health, for good weather and the blessings of the season, the heart of Dolores sang in overtones a pæan of joy for love given and returned. When she arose from her knees her eyes were shining, her face was calm and sealed with peace.

She dressed quickly, for she must start for the mission school betimes. Her simple toilet done, she glanced briefly in the glass: her glance caught there the reflection of buxom Ana, an old servant of the Montoyas, who was peering through the door of the room cautiously, a sly look on her face.

"A thousand blessings on the achievement of your maturity, little dove!" muttered the crone, while her mistress stared.

"*Gracias,* Ana—but could not your felicitations have awaited my descent?"

The woman placed a thick finger on her lips, thrusting out a folded note with the air of a conspirator.

"A message for your eyes only, my child, delivered secretly by the hulk Juan, Don Ramon's body-serv-

ant. . . . Fond words, doubtless, on the occasion of your birth's anniversary!"

The girl took the paper, turning it from side to side in her fingers. Joy was hers—much joy; yet a measure of misgiving also. How could she in conscience receive this clandestine message, an act contrary to custom as she knew it? Should she not rather yield the note, unopened and unread, to Don Tomaso? . . . . Yet to do this, she reflected quickly, would be to involve Ana, with consequences tragic to that faithful soul.

Something of her thoughts the other must have guessed, for she burst out anxiously:

"*Por dios,* little woodpecker! You would not then betray the good Ana? The matter, I make oath, reeks of innocence!"

Compunction smote Dolores.

"Take heart, Ana," she said, with a gesture of quaint dignity, "you shall not suffer through treachery of mine. . . . And now leave me—I would ponder the event at leisure!"

The maid vanished with a muttered, "*Gracias!*" Dolores, her doubts quickly overcome by eagerness, opened the letter.

"Adored One," she read, her breath coming unevenly, "on the evening of this day, long awaited, I shall ask your hand of Don Tomaso. I have hopes that Don Tomaso will not frown upon my suit; but should my hopes be disappointed, then—we shall see! As usual you will remain till late at the school—is it

not so? I shall ride thither, once our fate is known, to take swift counsel with you for the future. When the owl calls to you, little one, do not hesitate, but come!

"Till then, beloved,

Ramon."

Slowly Dolores folded the precious paper and hid it in her bosom. Her heart was beating tumultuously, her dark eyes were lustrous, lit by inward fire. But her face, drained of blood, was grave.

No thought now of relinquishing this, her first love note, to the mercies of Don Tomaso! In a few hours such intercourse would be permissible, blessed by her father's consent to the alliance—of this she had no doubt. Yet that she must, even for a few short hours, practise a deception foreign to her wont disquieted her. It seemed an evil omen. Throughout the day she felt oppressed, plagued by an unreasonable foreboding of disaster.

Toward evening, with the long hours behind, her mind grew calmer. The fatalism of her blood counselled patience, resignation to whatever might portend. The will of God would prevail assuredly—that she did not question. Her part was to subdue the longings of her heart, to accept humbly what God sent for her happiness or for her sorrow, as might transpire.

The arrival of Miss Innes, the Señorita Otero's friend, was a grateful diversion. She thought the stranger beautiful but cold, like an angel of white snow. During the evening meal she watched her unobserved, marvelled at her ways, at the gay sallies of

her wit, the apparent levity of her demeanor which seemed childish in a woman of the other's years—twenty at least!

Later she set about her evening's work as was her habit, correcting papers, planning lessons for next day. It was nearly ten when she finished and sat back, sighing with relief.

It had been hard to keep her mind on her tasks; now her thoughts reverted unchecked to the note she had received that morning. She drew it from its hiding-place and read it once more, for the hundredth time at least. Her bosom rose and fell quickly as the charmed words danced before her eyes. He loved her—Ramon loved her! . . . At any moment she might hope to hear the call that was to summon her—end her suspense gloriously!

She started suddenly—the call sounded clear! She sprang to her feet, catching up her shawl, and ran hastily to the door.

He was waiting as he had said, slim, cloaked, magic in the starlight. Dolores trembled with excitement, her breath came quickly as she stole toward him. She did not see the white face at the window above, was unaware of Claire watching her as she emerged. She saw only the eager gleam of his eyes, the white flash of his smile. His arms went out—a refuge to which she walked straight as if entranced.

"Ah, Ramon!" she whispered, "you have come! It is well then—we are affianced?"

She scarcely noticed that he ignored her question. His arms were about her, drew her close. She felt

his heart beat strongly against hers. She lifted her face trustingly; their lips met.

It seemed to the girl that her heart must break for joy. The earth swayed beneath her feet. The moment was timeless, a sharp distillation from the fruit of patient years. Not till they had drawn apart, till he led her into the shadows, till she found herself walking by his side along the narrow road, did her wits return.

She stopped then abruptly, her mind wide awake.

"Tell me, Ramon—you saw my father? Pressed your suit as you wrote you would?"

"*Si, cara mia!*" he said, but ceased where he should have hurried on.

"And Don Tomaso—we are indeed betrothed, *amigo?*"

Even in the shadows she saw his frown, marked his inexplicable hesitation.

"You love me, little one—before all else?" he asked.

"Oh, if I love you! How can you ask? . . . But our betrothal?"

There was bewilderment in her eyes, a note of fear in her voice.

Ramon reached out his arms to take her but she stood back, thrusting out her hands.

"No—I am afraid. There is something—tell me quickly, I beseech you!"

Ramon's voice was low and pleading:

"Hear me, Dolores—and judge between me and Don Tomaso!"

She gave a little cry, the single evidence of suf-

fering that escaped her. Thereafter she stood still, wide-eyed, her hands pressed against her breast while the youth poured out the tale of his ill-omened embassy.

"It is that I will not join the dark brethren which alone sets Montoya against me," he ended bitterly. "My faith prevents my yielding to his will, as I have told him. Judge then if he be well advised to meet that reasoning with the blunt threat to disallow our union?"

He waited tensely. The girl did not move, did not raise her eyes as she murmured:

"I do not judge my father."

The youth moved impatiently.

"Do you then judge me, Dolores?"

"I do not judge you, Ramon. I could not wish you to do that which your faith cannot countenance."

"So—you see me justified! You will not let this tyrant come between us. Our love——"

He stopped at her quick gesture. The marble immobility of her face did not change, but her eyes widened strangely.

"I do not understand what you would say, Ramon!"

"Listen well, then," he cried sharply; "Juan holds horses beyond the bend in the road above—no faster animals in all the region. Come with me, Dolores—trust yourself to my will! By daybreak we shall be far from Truchas—from the dominion of Montoya and his murderous crew. Trust to the strength and wonder of our love——"

"Is it love," broke in the girl gravely, "which would counsel dishonor?"

Ramon started as if struck, then stood back haughtily.

"Love dares all things. Love is supreme—nothing else counts beside. . . . Perhaps, Señorita, love means less than this to you?"

She gazed at him sorrowfully, compassionately, as if his disappointment was more to her than her own grief.

"Love means so much to me, my heart, that I would die rather than tarnish its pure luster by an unworthy act." As he would have interrupted she went on quickly: "Our ways are plain, Ramon—yours the straight path of your faith, mine the way my father has chosen for me. Our ways diverge—we shall suffer: so be it. Shall we alone of mortals escape suffering? Must we repine because the whip-lash falls now and not tomorrow?"

Love shone from her eyes, thrilled in her low voice; but in her eyes and voice was also a resolution unshakable and strong. Ramon ignored the evidences of her love to center on her denial of his will. Her resolution angered him because he knew that it destroyed his hopes inevitably.

His face was cold and hard. He bowed low, with an ironic courtesy.

"So be it, Señorita!" he said stiffly, and left her there.

She watched him go in silence, making no slightest effort to detain him. The furious clatter of horses' hoofs came a moment later to her ears. She listened till the sound grew faint and failed, then turned and

made her way slowly up the road toward home. A last plea to her father was in her mind.

She found Montoya seated upright in the high-backed chair, his eyes smoldering, his mouth grim.

"You are late," he said harshly; "I have waited long for you."

Faint hopes of softening his ukase died in the girl's heart: one might as easily melt the stone structure of the mountain, she reflected miserably, as change the mind of this stern effigy. Yet she moved swiftly forward, knelt before him and murmured:

"My father—have pity on me! I love Ramon!"

The sallow skin tightened across his bony features. Suspicion narrowed his eyes.

"De Vargas has been gone no longer than an hour. How have you so quickly learned the need for pity?"

Too late she saw her error. Nothing now would serve but confession that she had met Ramon—a rejected suitor; talked alone at night with him—whose suit had been rebuffed by her natural guardian.

Montoya's veins swelled with wrath as she told in a low voice of the assignation, of how Ramon had reported to her the substance of his interview. She said nothing of the youth's rash plan for elopement; she did not dare. As it was, her father's mien terrified her.

His red-rimmed eyes gleamed insanely. He leapt to his feet, his hands clutching at the air. In a choking voice he cried:

"So—Don Ramon is not content with insult, he must

employ treachery as well! There is but one retort worthy of Montoya—the snake must die!"

Dolores, appalled at the effect of her revelation, shrank from his words, from his livid face.

"Father! You will not kill him—let not that deadly sin be yours!"

He stared fixedly at her, his eyes expressionless.

"Do you play your part worthily henceforth, as becomes my daughter. For the rest, meddle not with men's work—trust me to see my duty clearly!"

## CHAPTER VI

### A CLASH OF WILLS

THAT night Dolores prayed long before the image of the Virgin in her room—prayers for courage, for the power to endure. Faith she did not pray for, since faith was hers already. Whatever happened, she was certain, was God's will, and therefore good. There was in her heart much pain but no doubt, no disloyalty.

For the present the cross of suffering was hers—but for the future? . . . The springs of hope lie deep, in youth especially: in her heart of hearts the girl could not believe that God had utterly forsaken her. The situation seemed to her desperate, indubitably—yet not so desperate but that omnipotence might still choose a way of escape for her and for Ramon. She waited, with what patience she could muster, for a sign.

It was Ramon's danger that now disturbed her chiefly. She could bear her own grief, with the Saints' help; but how support in silence and inaction the harrowing knowledge of her lover's peril? Her first impulse was to warn the youth, but this, she felt, of itself would avail nothing—or less than nothing. She knew well de Vargas' pride, his fiery courage; he would seek danger rather than avoid it, were the choice

frankly his. There was moreover the night's quarrel, if such it could be called, which raised a bar between them for the moment. In all likelihood a warning from her would serve merely to precipitate the issue she so dreaded.

A sense of frustration was upon her. As the hours wore by her lips moved unceasingly, her busy fingers told her beads without pause. Her limbs were numb, her soft flesh chilled; only in her breast burned a fire that would not die.

It was dawn before a thought came which eased her sharp distress: she would confess her quandary to Father Felipe, place her problem before him, seek his good offices to save Ramon. With the resolve her torment ceased, peace descended upon her. She rose stiffly from her knees and sought her bed. As light grew in the east and touched the dark peaks with rose the eyes of Dolores shut; she sighed once and slept.

Despite her exhaustion she was up very early. She dressed hastily and sought the abode of the good Padre, near the little church. The priest himself answered her knock, his face grave, no surprise visible in his deep-set eyes.

"Come in, my child, come in!" he said, opening wide the door. "You are early abroad, is it not so?"

Dolores' lips quivered; for the first time since trouble had come upon her she burst into tears. Gently the priest drew her in and soothed her with quiet words. Best that her tears come now—the fit would comfort her!

She knelt on the bare wooden floor, her head buried

in her arms. But soon her sobs grew slower, her shoulders rose and fell less violently. She began to speak, low-voiced, faltering at first but gradually in firmer tones.

She spared no detail of what had happened, beginning with the note she had received, continuing through the tale of its lamentable consequences.

"My own pain," she ended miserably, "is not insupportable. But that Ramon should be endangered through my initial weakness, my sin——"

"It is true," broke in the priest, "that had you shown the note you speak of to Don Tomaso, the meeting with Ramon which so incensed your father would not have taken place. To that extent were you at fault. Yet who knows—perhaps in any event the breach that troubles you would have occurred."

He paused, a thoughtful look in his eyes. The girl hung breathless on his words.

"Your stand against Ramon's silly plan of flight was well taken, at least. . . . What could the boy be thinking of," he added testily, "to flout Montoya so boldly!"

"I think," ventured Dolores, "that Ramon cannot realize the power of the Penitentes—nor the influence my father wields in their councils."

Her companion frowned.

"Montoya is powerful, yet there is a greater than he—Almighty God! Holy Church likewise is stronger than the band of the dark brethren! . . . There are grave matters lurking in the fringe of this affair, Señorita. I think that I must talk with Don Tomaso."

He rose with a resolute air; he seemed to the girl less a man than an instrument of God—a strong bulwark of hope.

"You will go to my father? You will overcome the danger that threatens Ramon?"

"Be of good cheer, my child," said the priest comfortingly, "God has the lives of all the faithful in His keeping."

Montoya had already risen and was breaking his fast with coffee and tortillas when the two reached his house. Dolores quickly effaced herself, vanishing in the direction of her room; Father Felipe, as one privileged beyond most, was ushered respectfully into the master's presence by Pedro, the one-eyed.

"God be with you, brother!" said the priest calmly.

Montoya stared, then rose hastily and returned the visitor's greeting.

"Will you break bread with me, Father?"

The other declined courteously, signifying by a gesture that he would await his host's convenience before stating his errand. But Don Tomaso, searching the unseasonable caller's face with a look of mingled curiosity and apprehension, promptly led the way to an inner room where they could be free from interruption.

He took his stand before the small wood fire, motioning to a comfortable chair opposite.

"You are afoot betimes, Father," he suggested politely.

For a moment the priest did not reply. There was a benign smile on his lips, his face otherwise was

without expression. One would never have guessed from look or manner that he was embarked on a struggle for supremacy with an antagonist he respected if he did not fear.

"There is a matter which requires settlement, Don Tomaso," he said mildly. "We shall discuss it in amity—is it not so?"

Montoya's red-rimmed eyes narrowed with suspicion. He was no match for the priest in diplomacy; blunt words suited him best.

"Speak on, Father," he said.

The other's smile disappeared. He gazed at his gaunt opponent with speculative eyes.

"Two years ago, following the unfortunate death of a youth strange to Truchas and its customs—a youth who it was said strove to lay bare the secrets of your brotherhood—we had some talk of the affair, you and I."

Don Tomaso nodded impatiently.

"It is a thing done and past. There are impetuous spirits among the brethren—why deny it? Moreover the prying gringo merited his fate—though, as you pointed out, there was a risk involved. . . . But is the case to be reopened now?"

The priest shook his head.

"It is of our talk I would speak—not of the incident itself; that, as you say, is of the past. But you will remember that while for that time I agreed to stand aside, for the future I warned you. I assured you that the Church desired peace with the brethren of the cross—who after all are children of the Church,

though erring—but I added that there were limits to forbearance. There is a wider world than Truchas: the Church is far-flung. It cannot contemplate the possibility of obloquy or defamation by reason of the acts of any of its members. . . . In short, we agreed that you were to remain supreme as formerly in matters affecting the individuals of your order; but your authority, I stipulated, must not presume to reach beyond their ranks. Where one not under your jurisdiction was concerned you were to make no hostile move, take no overt step, without a prior consultation with myself——"

"Have done, Father!" broke in Montoya restlessly. "To what does all this wordiness tend?"

The priest frowned, his suavity departing suddenly.

"It is of Ramon de Vargas I speak. Your threats against his life have reached my ears."

The eyes of the Penitente grew hot, his brow darkened.

"Dolores!" he charged bitterly, "it is she who has spread my idle words abroad. Strange ways the girl has of repaying a father's fond solicitude for her honor —for the honor of our ancient house!"

"You are her natural father, I make no doubt," retorted the priest sternly, "yet am I no less her spiritual guardian. She did well to come to me with the tale, and at once. As for the rest, her report has but confirmed my own suspicions of your evil designs toward de Vargas."

"The cub's insults pass all bounds," snarled the other; "denied my approval of his suit, he has had

the hardihood to seek out my daughter clandestinely——"

"Thus giving you a welcome opportunity to vent your hatred of the boy. Well I know, Don Tomaso, the envious anger that you bear Ramon, who alone among the youth of Truchas stands out against your influence—against the proselytizing fervor of your order!"

"And well *I* know," burst out the Penitente leader, beside himself, "to whose prevailing influence he owes his recalcitrancy. Is it that the Church, in dire straits for gold, needs de Vargas' wealth—that you cling so closely to your one ewe lamb?"

The priest's firm lips closed evenly. He gazed for a moment at the raging fanatic before him.

"I have been lenient with you, Montoya, hitherto—too lenient, perhaps; your pride becomes overweening. But hear this, and heed it"—his voice, gathering strength suddenly, rang out imperiously—"let but one hair of Don Ramon's head be harmed and I stamp you and your nest of vipers into dust!"

Don Tomaso's face went white at the impact of passion; his thin hands clenched and unclenched spasmodically.

"I have a hundred souls sworn to do my bidding," he cried shrilly, "to suffer and die if need be in defense of our society. Have a care, rash priest, lest you yourself fall an early victim to their indignant zeal!"

"Ah!" said the visitor softly, "so it has come to this—that you threaten a priest in holy orders, seek

to intimidate a vicar of the Most High God!" He rose and stretched forth his arm in a minatory gesture; his eyes flashed, his voice boomed sonorously: "Fool! Think you your followers would face death lightly outside the pale of Mother Church? Or how long would you, blasted by anathema, remain their leader?"

Montoya blanched, gnawing his lips uncertainly. The dread sentence of excommunication unmanned him. Torment and death were nothing—a welcome martyrdom. But to be banned by the Church, to have one's unblessed ashes scattered to the winds of heaven, to trust one's soul unconfessed to the menace of hell fires—it was unthinkable!

The priest, satisfied by the effect of his thunderbolt of argument, had turned toward the door.

Montoya moved forward swiftly, laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"A moment, Father! It is true, as you say, that the Church is supreme—have I ever denied your primacy in matters properly pertaining to your office?"

Father Felipe gazed at him with austere calm.

"You have verged close upon blasphemy, Don Tomaso! It is unmeet that I stay longer beneath a roof where one unshriven lingers with such a sin upon him."

Fear leapt to the Penitente's eyes.

"Shrive me, Father! I confess my sin—I seek absolution! Atonement shall be made—I myself will bear the cross when next the brethren gather——"

"It were more fitting," interrupted the priest coldly, "that you pray for grace to ask forgiveness of Don

Ramon, whom you have injured in your thoughts—that you beseech God's blessing upon his head and the protection of the Saints for his footsteps."

"It shall be done," agreed Montoya abjectly. "I shall pray for Don Ramon!"

For the moment he was vanquished utterly; yet later, when the priest had shriven him and left, his pride raised a bruised head.

He sat long motionless, in a deep silence; then straightened suddenly from his gloomy abstraction, muttering:

"No overt act—it is well. . . . Yet much may be done covertly, leaving no trace of the enabling hand."

He summoned Dolores. The girl entered looking pale and anxious, but with her natural dignity undiminished.

Montoya put a sudden end to her suspense.

"In the matter of Don Ramon," he said, with an air of studied humility, "Father Felipe has prevailed upon me to lay aside all thoughts of vengeance—leaving the event to God."

A glad light irradiated his daughter's countenance. She knelt quickly before him, clasping his knees with her hands.

"The Saints be praised, my father," she cried fervently, "that wrath has left your heart!"

Above her head Don Tomaso smiled wryly.

"Even so, my child. And now be off with you to school! It must not be said that one of our house is kept by aught from the accustomed round of duty.

. . . Send Pedro to me as you go—I would have speech with him!"

He kissed her brow and turned to his desk nearby, seizing pen and paper. When Pedro entered he gave the one-eyed man a scrawled note that said merely:

"A friend bids you beware of Montoya who seeks your life at the first chance."

Pedro glanced up questioningly.

"For Don Ramon de Vargas," his master directed, "to be delivered without his knowing how or whence the warning comes. I trust to your discretion."

To himself he muttered, as the man left:

"If I know de Vargas he will not rest till he has wrung the neck of this matter. . . . Nor is it forbidden a Christian to defend his life from hostile action—should such perchance develop."

## CHAPTER VII

### RANCHO DEL ORO

THE narrow mesa shelf on which Truchas was situated widened noticeably north of town, where the *hacienda* of de Vargas began. Rancho del Oro, as it was called, took in the whole of the level plateau for miles; it reached besides on either hand high up the eastern mountain slopes and westward down into the valley of the Rio Grande. There was both summer and winter range, fields irrigated from mountain streams, spacious barns and corrals flanking the large adobe ranch house with its cool rooms and shady *patio*. A thousand head of cattle bore the well-known Bar V brand. A half-score of dark-faced punchers, pick of Truchas' youth, handled stock for the young owner who in person directed their activities.

As a rule Ramon rose with the sun, spent most of his waking hours in the saddle. Tough as rawhide, graceful as a jaguar, he rode and roped with the deft ease of perfect muscular coordination. Even in rest rigidity was lacking; in moments of relaxation one sensed the passionate veiled energy beneath apparent lethargy as surely as one feels the menace of a coiling rattlesnake. From immobility the youth could spring lightning-like into instant vivid action. His face then would glow as if from an inner fire, his eyes would

narrow and glitter ominously. When anger drove him he was dangerous and swift as a falling sword. His men knew and feared those sudden sharp releases, his horses likewise: he was well served, on the whole, by man and beast.

His man Juan, squatting in the sun before the ranch house, watched his young master cautiously as the latter, back against the wall, sat with a brown paper cigarette between his lips, his blank eyes fixed on space. The sun was high in the heavens; horses stood saddled nearby. They should have been out on the range long since, helping the hands gather and drive in the quota of steers for an approaching shipment. Yet the youth still lingered unmindful of the passing moments, deaf it appeared to duty, blind to the anxious, puzzled glances of his faithful body-servant.

It was the morning after the interview with Montoya, the subsequent disastrous meeting with Dolores; this fact accounted for his abstraction, his unwonted neglect of ranch affairs. It could hardly be said that he was thinking; he was feeling rather—balked desire, sullen anger, sharp regret and disappointment. Curiously, what irked him more than all else was compunction that he had allowed Montoya a license, in their dispute, which at any other time he would have forcefully abridged. Holding his cherished plan of elopement in reserve, he had wanted no quarrel with Don Tomaso then; but now, with the defection of Dolores rankling in his mind, he wished fervently that he had given free rein to his violent impulses during the encounter with her father.

Yet bitter as was his resentment against the old fanatic, whose stubborn bias he saw as the chief obstacle to his marriage with Dolores, it paled before the pangs he suffered by reason of the girl's unexpected stand. She had set her judgment against his; rejected his well-considered project as soon as broached —put her vague concept of duty, of propriety, before the concrete proffer of his love. He felt indignantly that he had been betrayed—though in truth his expectations only had deceived him.

He had never really known Dolores—had never had a chance to know her; his fancy therefore had made of her a mere ideal creature, a shadow complement to his own nature. In consequence he had not dreamed that she would fail to see their predicament and its solution eye to eye with him. That she had destroyed his illusion of her inevitable complaisance, that she had stood out for a view of the situation inimical to his, maddened him. In his chagrin the youth ignored her reasoning wholly—her loyalty to her father, her notion of fit conduct in the circumstances—and jumped straightway to the conclusion that her love was less than his.

Foolish, no doubt; yet the boy was thoroughly sincere; his suffering was real enough. Hurt pride added fuel to the fire of frustrated desire that tortured him. The debacle of last night, he told himself, had killed his love. . . . That which was really love lived on, of course; though for the moment it was buried beneath fierce emotions which sprang from the spurious phases of his passion.

His face was gloomy, his eyes sombre as they brooded upon vacancy. Before him was the dusty road stretching southward across the flat, the road to Truchas. On each side the yellow plain simmered beneath the sun, which blazed from a turquoise sky. To the left, half a mile distant, was the fringe of woodland that marked the beginning of the forest. Thence with gradually steeper slope the long range rose, to culminate in the great peak that towered high above and dominated the land.

Ramon saw nothing of the scene—not even the two mounted figures that appeared far down the road, approaching at an easy lope; though Juan's uneasy eye had already picked up the moving dots in that immensity of static space. The rider of the roan he knew—Ricardo Quintana, the fire guard. But the one astride the sorrel—slim, khaki-clad, debonair—who but the stranger he had heard of the night previous: the artist—the painting heretic?

Juan's black eyes glistened avidly, his brow wrinkled in ludicrous amazement.

"*Carramba!*" he burst out unthinkingly, "a woman—clad even as a man!"

With the words he glanced quickly and fearfully toward his master, but no word of rebuke followed his unsolicited remark.

Ramon seemed not to have heard. His eyes, no longer sullen, were fixed on the approaching riders with a look of interest not unmixed with relief, as if the diversion their coming promised was more welcome than his own mood.

They drew near quickly; the sorrel slowed to a trot, then to a running walk. The stranger sat him well, erect and poised in the saddle, her stirrups low hung in the Western style. She was beautiful beyond doubt, despite her unwomanly attire—fragile and fair, vivid and cool like a wind from the north.

Quintana rode out in advance and swung lightly from his horse. Ramon, rising to his feet quickly, ignored him for the moment; his eyes had not strayed from the girl who sat smiling vaguely, her cheeks flushed from the ride.

"Welcome, Señorita!" he said courteously, "welcome to El Rancho del Oro!"

"*Gracias,* Señor," she returned, "but I come this time not on my own errand. It is my companion who would speak with you—on forest business."

The youth bowed and turned to the Mexican with the scar.

"The counting of the cattle for shipment, is it not?"

Ricardo nodded.

"A matter of form, as you know, Don Ramon. One hundred and ten head is the number set down."

Ramon indicated the empty corrals.

"It is unfortunate, but not yet have the beasts been driven in. In an hour or so, perhaps—my men even now gather them on the mountain range."

Ricardo hesitated, glancing at Claire.

"It's all right," she put in promptly, "we're out for a ride—partly, anyway. We can return later for the count."

Ramon offered a suggestion with a trace of unwonted diffidence:

"We were about to ride to meet the men coming in, Juan and I. If the Señorita would care to watch the drive—see the method of our work?"

Claire clapped her hands.

"A round-up! That will be fascinating."

At a curt gesture from his master Juan brought forward the horses which had been standing near, awaiting their riders' will. Ramon vaulted lightly into the saddle and headed for the fringe of woods to the east. The others followed in a canter.

At first the stand was scattering, with little ground cover, but as they rode farther the slope became steeper and the brush thick. A trail was found and followed; open formation was abandoned and the party progressed slowly, single file. Ramon was in the lead, Claire next, Ricardo followed her and Juan brought up the rear.

Ramon explained to the girl as they rode how the cattle were located in the higher levels and driven down to the open mesa where they were gathered in a herd, where the steers needed for shipment were "cut out"—roped and separated from the rest—and driven into the corrals where they were counted. He had scarcely finished speaking when faint cries sounded ahead from different points—approaching cowhands calling to one another.

"Here they come!" announced Ricardo.

A crashing in the undergrowth to their left was heard suddenly. A big steer plunged by them, headed

south. Ramon spoke sharply to Juan, who dashed off in pursuit.

The noise of tearing brush became more frequent; the vanguard of the herd was upon them. To one side and the other steers ploughed by, with an occasional cow lumbering behind. They came in twos and threes now, in bunches of five or ten. But always when they saw the riders they sheered off in alarm, much to Claire's relief.

Ramon turned and smiled at her, his hand fingering the rope at his saddle horn.

"There is small danger," he said, as if in answer to her thoughts, "they are more anxious to escape than to stay. But a stampede—that is different!"

He told her how a storm had once frightened a night herd he had been guarding, how they had milled and circled for a time, then suddenly in a panic borne down upon him all together like a mountain falling; how he had turned from the menace of that roaring avalanche and spurred his horse to safety, knowing meanwhile that a misstep, a hidden gopher hole, might hurl him and his mount beneath the galloping hoofs.

Claire's heart as she listened to the naïf recital was racing, her breath came quickly. The tale was real to her. The setting authenticated thoughts of danger, of hairbreadth escape, of heroic nonchalance in the face of threatening death. The dim woods which the sun scarcely penetrated, the narrow trail, the vines and brush high as one's head on either hand: these lent an atmosphere that made the account she listened to natural, prosaic almost.

She felt an impulse to share her excitement with someone other than the hero of the episode; she turned to address the scar-faced Mexican—he was nowhere visible. She was about to remark on his odd desertion to Ramon, when they unexpectedly entered a little glade with a small stream running through it—a valley in miniature.

The girl's speech remained unvoiced. She checked her mount and gazed wonderingly at the nook disclosed. Beyond the stream was a tiny flat with tall grass and wild-flowers, dappled in the sun.

"How beautiful!" she exclaimed.

Ramon was staring at her intently. He could not tell her how desirable she seemed, there on the edge of the sunny oasis, beneath the dark overhanging trees. Yet the sight thrilled him strangely, for all his muteness. The sense of her beauty and youth was overwhelming. Scars left by the defection of Dolores were all at once covered over with a soft film of glamour. He had dreamed of angels like this, but never a living woman so white and pure, so infinitely desirable.

He hardly knew his own voice as he ventured:

"Perhaps—if the Señorita is fatigued—we might dismount for a moment, rest here?"

She looked at him with a bright, quick glance.

"And the cattle—the drive?"

His voice was eager now.

"It will be half an hour—an hour perhaps before the herd is made and held. . . . If the Señorita wishes——"

"We will dismount as you suggest," she said with calm decision; "the spot is very beautiful."

## CHAPTER VIII

### AN UNWELCOME INTRUDER

"WHAT puzzles me," Claire said, "is that a person of your intelligence and energy—to say nothing of your means—should be willing to bury himself here in this out-of-the-way place!"

She had led the talk deftly to Ramon and his affairs. Her interest soothed the youth's hurt pride; his reserve, fathomless at first, melted before her eager inquiries. Never before had he talked so freely of himself to anyone—to a woman least of all!

He told her of his lonely childhood, of his schooling at Santa Fé, of the time not long past when he had returned home to find his parents dead of the smallpox, the care of the de Vargas interests devolving upon him—a mere boy. Modestly he described with what misgivings he had essayed the task of managing the great ranch with its many-sided business, how finally he had achieved success. Yet—his manner more than his words indicated—he had failed to find satisfaction.

Claire's comment was in relation to this implied flaw in the harmony of his existence. At her words Ramon glanced up quickly.

"Leave Truchas? But the ranch would not thrive

unattended, Señorita." He hesitated, then blurted out: "There is, too, the matter of my race!"

"Why, you are American, of course!"

He shook his head slowly.

"So the law says—but to your invading countrymen I am one of an inferior breed, despite my wealth which they covet. My skin is darker than theirs, I speak a strange tongue, my thoughts run counter to theirs. . . . . An incident: at school once, in a childish dispute, one of my fellows struck me—to my mind a deadly insult. I would have killed him had I not been restrained. In the outcome I—not my assailant—was punished; yet I had been but true to the code of my upbringing!"

"Oh, there are racial differences of viewpoint and custom, no doubt. As a child you could not understand, perhaps—but now that you are a man——"

"Those differences you speak of lightly are of the essence, Señorita. There is a prejudice not to be overcome against me—I am called a Mexican, a greaser! I—whose ancestors conquered the wide land south to the Gulf, westward to the Coast, while the forefathers of your Anglo-Saxon traders were shivering in their log huts along the shore of the Atlantic —kept at bay by a handful of skulking redmen! Must I then, to win the good-will of your race, sink my natural character, take on American ways, deny the heritage of the conquistadores? Ah, no; sooner will I remain an alien in the land my fathers explored and won for Spain!"

"In history your race has indeed been great—" began the girl, but Ramon broke in quickly:

"It is history, yes. . . . You do well to stress the fact. The prestige and the ancient glory of my race have departed; the power of Spain is broken—perhaps forever. We are a dwindling stock, an impotent strain. Only here and there has the old blood remained pure, the source undefiled. Is it strange, then, that I would live and die here among my own people who think and feel as I do, who honor me for the great name I bear?"

Claire smiled.

"Here is one who respects you, Don Ramon—not only for your name!"

His face flushed with pleasure.

"Ah—that is kind, Señorita! Yet in truth with you I feel no strangeness. And how you speak my tongue! Is it that you too have Spanish blood in your veins?"

"No. . . . A linguistic gift perhaps—my mother was partly French. And I have always been sympathetic to the Latin culture."

"We shall be friends," he pronounced, with conviction. "It is the true companionship of another heart one longs most for, after all."

The girl's eyes dropped. For all her resolute control she was conscious of a slight acceleration of breathing.

"Friendship is a great boon," she murmured, "but can a stranger take that near place reserved for old comrades—friends of one's childhood? Is there no

one to whom you are already bound by strong established bonds?"

The boy's brow clouded suddenly.

"There was such an one, Señorita. I had hoped, indeed, to make that one my wife. Yet a matter intervened—my love for her is dead."

Claire recalled, with inner irony, the tableau she had observed unseen the night before—the two figures embracing passionately in the starlight, the long kiss. She remembered her own romantic mood, her fantastic expectations, the wild moment in which she dreamed that the young cavalier had come for her—to call her from her window to a night of love. She remembered the sudden rude awakening from this fond vision, coincident with the emergence of Dolores; the subsequent fury and self-revilings—the ultimate determination to crush the silly sentiment that had crept unbidden into her heart.

Yet she did not betray her present thoughts by word or look.

"The break was recent, you say?"

"No longer ago than last night, Señorita!" He paused. His companion waited, cool, apparently uneager.

Abruptly Ramon made up his mind to speak.

"I will tell you, Señorita, since we are friends. . . . You must know the truth of the matter—it is best so."

Impulsively he poured out the tale of his broken romance: how for long his heart had been set on Dolores, how he had sought her hand in vain against

the obduracy of Don Tomaso, how at length, failing to move the Penitente, he had planned the elopement which the girl straightway negatived.

"Thereby she slew my love, Señorita," he ended bitterly; "for love without faith, without trust in the loved one, is a mockery."

Claire's eyebrows rose slightly; a faint smile touched her lips.

"You think that this is not just a lover's quarrel? That time, which cures so much, will not compose it?"

He moved his hand scornfully.

"Ah, no—it is over! I know this the more certainly because——"

He stopped in time, his face strained. What he had been about to say astonished him. How could he tell this stranger the amazing fact of which he himself became conscious only in that instant—that somehow, by some mysterious alchemy, she had taken the place Dolores hitherto had held unchallenged in his heart?

He did not need to tell her, had he but known: his face spoke for him, the gleam in his eyes betrayed his secret.

Claire, noting the signal lights of passion, decided that the time to end their talk had come. She glanced about the glade, prepared to arise from the stone by the brook where she had been sitting.

But her eyes in their roving flight became suddenly fixed, widened fearfully. Her heart seemed to stop. A great bull stood not ten yards away at the edge of the level ground, glaring at her evilly.

Ramon sprang upright at her cry and turned quickly, his face hard.

"That one," he said, as he observed the cause of her alarm, "looks displeased. You shall wait here for a moment, Señorita, until I have pacified him."

With the words he leaped lightly to the saddle and began shaking out his coiled rope. He whirled the long loop slowly, driving his restive mount toward the beast, which bellowed deep in its throat and pawed the sod with angry zeal. Claire's eyes clung to the loop that circled lazily.

The bull bellowed again, then threw down its head and charged straight across the glade at the approaching horseman. Ramon's loop, suddenly vitalized, shot forward through the air. Claire gasped as it touched an overhanging branch in its flight and fell deflected, yards wide of its mark.

The young vaquero's face did not alter at the failure of his first offensive. He changed his tactics swiftly to meet the new crisis. As the bull neared—when it seemed that nothing could save man and horse from the oncoming horns—Ramon twitched his mount to one side, sprang from his saddle, and landed astride the bull's back, face to the front. At the same moment he leaned forward and caught the beast's horns in his hands, then swung off to one side.

The massive head turned grotesquely. The bull stumbled and fell almost at Claire's feet. Before it could move Ramon had jerked a Colt's from the holster, placed the muzzle of the weapon against the bull's head and shot it dead.

The youth rose to his feet, smiling, frankly pleased by his exploit. But as he glanced at Claire he stared, dumfounded by her face.

She was gazing beyond him, across his shoulder, a look of horror in her eyes.

"Behind you—look behind you!" she screamed.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE MAN IN THE BRUSH

At Claire's cry a flicker of light seemed to pass through the air and a long knife struck in the ground at Ramon's feet. It stood quivering gently, a white square of paper attached to its wooden haft. There was at the same time a sound of crackling twigs in the brush, whereat Ramon, levelling his gun quickly, sent bullet after bullet smashing into the thick cover that hedged in the glade.

The shots failed to find their mark, apparently; there came from the depths of the woods a faint jeering laugh, then silence. De Vargas ceased shooting and turned hastily to his companion. She was, he saw, deathly pale; her eyes clung fascinated to the knife upright in the ground.

"I thought he meant it for you—to kill you!" she whispered.

Ramon sprang to her side as she swayed suddenly. He threw a supporting arm about her and lowered her gently to the grassy bank of the stream. To his consternation he saw that she had fainted dead away.

Hurriedly he chafed her wrists, bathed her temples with water. Her collapse was alarming, yet not more so to him than the look he had surprised in her eyes

as she cried out. She had feared for him—for his life!

She seemed delicately frail as he bent over her. She was so pure and so fair . . . . her smooth white skin, her pale golden hair, the long lashes close against her cheeks, the red lips slightly parted. The perfume of her hair, the scent of her fresh, youthful femininity intoxicated him.

His heart pounded violently, his blood seemed on fire. He bent impulsively and pressed his lips to hers, then drew back quickly, abashed at his own temerity. . . . It was minutes later before he saw her stir, saw her eyes open and gaze blankly up at him.

"You are unharmed, Señorita?" he asked anxiously.

Comprehension came into her stare; she struggled to a sitting posture.

"How stupid of me— I fainted, didn't I? When I saw that awful face in the bushes——"

"A face—you saw a face?"

She nodded.

"The face of a swarthy man with one eye. His arm was drawn back; I could catch the gleam of a knife in his hand. I thought he was going to throw it at you . . . . that's what frightened me so!"

"You—feared for me?"

She smiled faintly at his eager inquiry.

"Naturally . . . . I might have spared my fears, as it happened. There was a paper attached to the knife, was there not, a message, perhaps?"

He muttered reluctantly:

"It was nothing of importance, Señorita."

"Not important? An odd method, surely, to deliver trivial news!"

He flushed at her ironic comment, then without a word handed her the note.

Claire read the brief scrawl with interest:

"A friend bids you beware of Montoya who seeks your life at the first chance."

"A warning from Dolores?" she suggested.

Ramon shook his head.

"It is not credible. The man you have described was Pedro the one-eyed, a creature of absolute fidelity. Montoya himself sent the warning."

The girl's face expressed perplexity.

"But why in this way—with an obvious attempt at anonymity? And why should he wish to kill you in any case?"

The youth hesitated, seeking words.

"Our customs, as I have said, are not those of the Americans, Señorita. With us honor comes first—above all else. Don Tomaso has learned, doubtless, of my meeting with his daughter—lacking his permission. It is an insult in his eyes, an affront to be wiped out only by the shedding of blood."

"Well," she returned, still puzzled, "if that be so, why did he not send word openly—at least sign the note?"

Ramon frowned.

"It is in the code to warn one against whom a blood feud is declared: Montoya knows this well. Yet he knows too that such an encounter as he contemplates is frowned upon by Father Felipe, whom

Don Tomaso perhaps would not offend. There is antipathy of a sort between them, but not yet an open quarrel. The warning Pedro bore was to have been delivered secretly, none knowing whence it came—that much is apparent. Thus when I sought an explanation of Montoya's attitude he could not be blamed if violence ensued—or so he might imagine."

Claire stared incredulously.

"You mean to say you would seek satisfaction of Don Tomaso, even had you not recognized the bearer of this message as his servant?"

The youth bowed stiffly.

"Even so, Señorita! One may err in such affairs, but only on the side of honor. There is, too, in this instance, the knowledge on my part of the grudge Montoya holds against me for my attitude toward the Penitentes. It is high time the issue between us was decided."

Her face had a baffled look. She laughed shortly, with a note of exasperation.

"I really believe," she said, "that you're glad of this chance to kill someone—or be killed!"

"That is as God wills, Señorita," returned the youth with a shrug; "one can but follow the path of honor as it lies plain before one's sight."

Claire bit her lip. After a moment's silence she stretched out her hand.

"Help me up, please! I've quite recovered now. . . . . We must return—find the others!"

He took her hand, helped her to arise. Despite her words she seemed still unsteady on her feet. She

leaned against Ramon heavily; the warm contact roused him strangely.

His pulses sang and pounded; there was a mist before his eyes. Beside himself, he flung an arm about her, drew her close. A torrent of adoring words escaped him.

His outburst did not take Claire wholly by surprise, nor did it entirely displease her. Neither, however, did it drive her beyond the bounds of self-control. She did not struggle but lay passively, her face composed, an enigmatic look in her blue eyes.

The youth's fervor ebbed as she gazed calmly up at him, cold as a naiad in his arms. A sudden consciousness of presumption came over him. He released her abruptly, stammering excuses.

"You need no pardon, Don Ramon," she said frankly; "it is an honor you do me—if you really care. . . . Yet how can I think that, when so short a time since you would have wed Dolores? Do you not deceive yourself, *amigo*—is it not pique chiefly which prompts this demonstration?"

Ramon's cheeks flushed darkly, his eyes grew fierce.

"Ah, no, Señorita—that is unjust! I loved Dolores, it is true; but that love is dead—buried with the past." He paused, to resume fervently: "Love comes and goes, who can tell how or why? A look, a word, the curve of a cheek or a soft wisp of hair—it is not a thing to explain! I cannot say truly why you have won my heart—so soon. I can say only that I love you—that for you I would yield everything I hold dear if you required it!"

She examined his shining face thoughtfully.

"Would you, to save my peace of mind, ignore the message Montoya has sent you—avoid him for the present?"

He hesitated—a struggle between love and pride; but the new passion won.

"I will ignore the message," he said. His eyes devoured her. "And you, Señorita—can you not give me hope?"

For a moment she made no reply. A little line grew between her eyes.

"I do not love lightly, Don Ramon. I have had cause to distrust love and its summer lightnings—to know how quickly love can change."

"Yet my love, beautiful one, is strong and unchangeable!"

She did not smile, nor did she remind him how quickly his late love had altered. She knew men's love, she thought: a heady compound of desire and vanity, rooted in inconsistency, feeding on half-promises and shrewd denials, dying soon with satiety or disappointment—a love of self rather than of some other.

"I am not indifferent to you, Ramon," she said at last, "but love—that's a big word! I am older in experience if not in years than you, less impulsive—less courageous I should say, perhaps. . . . But I do like you!"

He leaned swiftly toward her, his face alight and eager.

"I shall make you love me, *cara mia,* even though

you be a maiden of ice! I shall light the authentic fires of love in your heart! I shall make you a woman aflame with love—a Fire woman!"

He would have caught her to him once more, but she thrust him back with gentle firmness.

"No, no, Ramon! I am not a child to be petted, or to be won by kisses. Let us be friends now—good friends if you will. Later—we shall see. In the meantime I have a plan: you know that I am an artist—that I came here to paint?"

He nodded, waiting.

"From the first moment I saw you I wanted to paint you—make a portrait of you. If the idea is not repugnant? I was afraid the prejudice of the Penitentes——"

He gestured scornfully.

"They are to be pitied, Señorita—ignorant souls led by the leash of superstition. There is no link between myself and the dark brethren. . . . As for the portrait, know that I would please you in any way that offers. Nor need you fear," he added, with naïf dignity, "that I shall burden you with further protestations of my love!"

She smiled companionably, laying a light hand on his arm.

"Thanks, my friend! You are considerate——"

She broke off as a loud hail sounded from the woods near at hand.

"Ricardo!" she cried. "He has returned."

Ramon stared at her expressionlessly.

"You rode hither from Santa Fé in Quintana's com-

pany—today you join him as he rides abroad on forest business. You are friendly with him?"

She snapped her fingers lightly.

"A guide merely, Don Ramon—paid for his work. Hereafter, if you wish, I shall enjoy a more congenial escort."

Light came into his face; he leaned forward swiftly but checked his impulsive movement as the dull thud of hoofs sounded close by. A moment later Ricardo appeared in the narrow trail where it debouched upon the glade.

The Mexican's face was guileless as he regarded the two standing there before him. He was volubly remorseful over his desertion of the Señorita, which he explained as due to his attempt to turn back certain of the cattle that were escaping southward, away from the ranch.

"The steers for shipment have been cut out and driven into their corrals," he ended, "and I have already counted them. The tale is exact. . . . But what is here?" he asked quickly as his eyes fell on the dead bull near the stream.

Briefly Ramon described the incident, minimizing his own part in the affair. They left the glade and took their way toward the ranch. At the fork of the road before the ranch house Claire bade her friend *adios* and turned homeward in Quintana's company.

She was wrapped in thought for a time; the Mexican maintained silence also, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. Once only he glanced sidewise at her brooding countenance, a quick, keen glance followed by a

momentary frown; yet he did not break in upon her mood.

Her mind was full of the youth she had just left; of her sudden and quite unexpected conquest. She was perplexed and a little fearful. She could not understand her own reaction to the fact. Last night she had been mad—she must have been: she would have given all for a word from the young rancher who had so strangely captured her imagination. Now that the word had been spoken she would have withdrawn had that been possible. She was obscurely troubled; there was doubt in her heart, and a superstitious sense of danger. She felt as if she had been pulled by some sudden undertow into a stream whose course she could not chart, whose end eluded her.

She raised her eyes to the broad plain simmering in the sunlight, to the soft line of far mountains across the Rio Grande. With an effort she shook off her growing depression, turned with a whimsical smile to her companion.

"I have been thinking of the Penitentes," she said, "and their cruel folly. . . . One would imagine that in a land like this—so beautiful, so inspiring, men would live nobly, happy and unashamed as gods!"

"Men make of earth a hell, wherever they are," returned the other promptly; "it is their nature, Señorita!"

The cynical comment, considering its source, astonished her. She stared at the speaker—thought for a breath that she surprised a look of bitterness in his eyes: then he was smiling his sardonic smile once

more, his eyes narrowed sleepily. Yet the momentarily revealing look left in her mind a curious impression. Again it seemed to rouse in her the memory of another face different but still the same (whose face she could not for the moment say).

"You remind me of someone, Ricardo," she said impulsively; "someone I knew years ago."

He shrugged indifferently.

"A double? It is not unusual, Señorita. In Mexico I have known a man killed on account of just such a chance resemblance."

His manner was pleasantly casual. How different, thought Claire, were these Mexicans from men of the Anglo-Saxon strain. She wondered who and what Quintana was really. What had been his history? What was going on behind the façade of his smooth, smiling face?

His next words, spoken in his unvarying low voice, drove speculation from her mind, filled her with dismay.

"When I said I left you to run cattle, on the trail, Señorita—I lied. I left because I saw in the brush a man lurking—a man whose good-will I suspected, who I thought should be observed even as he was observing you and Don Ramon."

Claire gasped.

"And—you followed him?"

"Even to the end. I trailed the one-eyed Pedro, servant of Don Tomaso. I was close by, prepared to intervene if necessary, when he lay hid at the

edge of the glade where you and Don Ramon dismounted—and remained."

"And you saw——?"

"What I saw," said Ricardo gravely, "is locked in my heart. . . . You may trust me, Señorita!"

## CHAPTER X

### FIESTA

THE days moved slowly for Dolores, whose dream of love had vanished leaving a twilight sorrow in its stead. She had neither heard of nor seen Ramon since the night of their estrangement; no longer did she hope for reconciliation. Yet she did not blame the youth—there was no place in her heart now for anger. She accepted her loss as a fact dolorous but inevitable, a fact to be met with the sword of courage and the iron buckler of faith.

She was not yet aware of his new infatuation. She had heard, of course, of the visits Miss Innes made daily to El Rancho del Oro; knew, too, the ostensible purpose of these trips—that the artist was engaged on a notable portrait of de Vargas. Oddly, perhaps, it did not occur to her that another end was being served by the association; that propinquity was fast blowing to a fire spark struck by the contact of two responsive personalities. Claire hitherto had been in her eyes a creature set apart, a being of a world other than hers, aloof, recondite. Her feeling for the young artist was tinged by awe; she never dreamed that passion could mar the serenity of that calm face,

nor that Ramon, who had loved her once, could turn for solace to the cold, inviolable stranger.

She awoke to the realities of the situation on the night of the fiesta of San Guadalupe—one of the periodic holidays with which the Church enlivened the usual monotony of workaday existence for the folk of Truchas. All day had the town been given over to celebration of the festival. A barbecue at del Oro, a procession in the village—every house had discharged its quota of revellers; the day was noteworthy. When evening and the inevitable *baile* came, the long hall on the town's outskirts where the dance was held was filled to overflowing.

Guitars, a violin and an accordion furnished the music. The bare pine-boarded room was lit by lamps hung on the wall, against which was ranged a row of straight-backed chairs. Elders sat here, for the most part: the dancing floor proper became the province of dark-skinned youths and maidens who circled and swayed and stepped in unalterable gravity to the melancholy strains of the orchestra.

This dance was the feature of the holiday Dolores had looked forward to with most keen pleasure. Before the break with Ramon her anticipatory bliss had been unalloyed. Much time and forethought had she spent in devising her costume for the occasion: her dress, black inevitably, but of good material and tastefully designed, the long-fringed mantilla of her mother saved for great occasions, silk hose and dainty slippers, her favorite fan and a flower for the hair. Dreams also had been inwoven with the coarser stuff of her

attire, and some of these remained; they lent her finery a touch of bright significance in her own sight. Perhaps, she thought with a timid expectancy that survived disillusion, Ramon's eyes also might see there the evanescent beauty hope had sewn with slow and patient stitches.

She sat against the wall by round-eyed Ana, fanning herself with a grave youthful dignity. Her comely face was rapt, her dark eyes glowed. In that expectant moment the rude hall was to her a ballroom exquisite and nobly furnished, the music was persuasive, Pedro and Juan and Pablo and Vincente were caballeros all; youth and a quickened heartbeat transfigured the scene, made of the homely gathering a spectacle gorgeous and sense-enthralling. Thus was she sitting, thus dreaming when Ramon entered with Claire on his arm.

A murmur of admiration ran through the room at their advent; all eyes were theirs. Don Ramon would grace any company, even the most exalted; his companion, the strange Señorita, was a vision vouchsafed seldom to the eyes of men! She had donned for the occasion a clinging gown of rose with a silver sash, a fillet of silver was about her hair. Her cheeks and lips were red, her blue eyes vivacious; she seemed happy and without a care, as are the blest.

Dolores stared at her breathless with admiration; but her eyes first sought Ramon's calm, proud young face and returned there shortly. There was a light in his face, she saw—a strange look of elation. His eyes, roving about, dwelt on her suddenly—she could

feel that careless glance through all her being. But even as her heart fluttered in her breast, as she essayed a smile of greeting, his blank uneager look swept past and returned to his companion, leaving Montoya's daughter cold and desolate.

He spoke to the fair stranger, placed an arm about her waist. She glanced laughingly up at him. A light leapt to his eyes that burned Dolores as if a hot coal had been pressed upon her heart. That look—that falsely loving look—in a moment burned to ashes the tender feeling in her breast. It seemed to her that she must scream aloud with the agony that came at knowledge of her lover's recreancy. Her patiently woven dreams faded; in her own view she seemed suddenly to have become pitifully poor where once she had been rich. Illusion with its fond joys left her, in its stead was a new pain, a new despair deeper and more corroding than any she had known hitherto.

They were circling the room slowly—coming toward her. The eyes of the Americano flitted about, a smile, half interested, half amused, hung on her lips. Would she, Dolores wondered wildly, smile at her suffering, at her utter ravishment? . . . Certainty was hers in that instant that she could not by any exercise of resolution meet those mocking eyes, those red triumphant lips. Her fan over her face she turned quickly, whispered to Ana: "Wait for me here—do not follow, on your soul!" and fled from the lit room, from the hideous din, from a scene more hateful in her eyes than death.

None saw her leave, or if they saw her did not

seek to stay her flight. She slipped from the room into a night of stars, into star-shot darkness as soothing to her strained nerves as sleep to a dismayed insomniac. With lowered head and veil close-drawn about her face she passed the knot of men gathered at the door, fled down the short path to the road and turned eastward under the row of trees that lined the narrow way.

The trees shut off the faint light of the stars, which elsewhere made objects dimly visible. There were few houses; the edge of town was here. At a safe distance from the lighted hall, where the lugubrious music sounded faint and thin, she paused, glanced hastily about, and flung herself down at the base of a great cottonwood, free at last to yield without restraint to the storm of emotions that assailed her.

Straightway pain seized her heart with cruel fingers; she gasped, writhing on the ground—yet no tears came. The wish for surrender, the resignation that was hers by right of blood was gone, replaced by fiercer passions equally her heritage from forbears proud as they were fatalistic. Her love in a breath had turned to venom, to a strong yearning for vengeance. She could have driven home the knife aimed at de Vargas' breast, strung joyfully the pulleys of the rack on which he had been stretched. She groaned, heavy with hate, grinding small white teeth together furiously, clenching her hands till the nails bit the palms.

In the midst of her paroxysm she paused at a sound nearby; raised herself on one elbow silently. Along the road walked a man, wraithlike in the faint

radiance of the stars. As she sat staring, straining her eyes, the cigarette between his lips glowed suddenly: with a catch of the breath she recognized the gaunt features of her father!

Montoya stopped in his stride, even as the girl shrank back instinctively against the bole of her tree, and threw his head forward, listening. The patter of hoofs was audible. A horseman approached on a lope, drew up at Don Tomaso's muttered hail and swung lightly from the saddle.

"*Comme la va, compadre!*" was his low greeting.

Montoya's harsh voice sounded.

"You are prompt, *amigo*. . . . My summons reached you—yes?"

"*Si,* Señor," returned the other, and glanced quickly about. His face was hidden in the black shadow of his sombrero, but from his build and quick decisive movements no less than from his voice Dolores knew him for Ricardo Quintana, the fire guard.

The fact surprised her— That he should be on terms of apparent intimacy with her father seemed doubly strange to her. Montoya was of old an enemy of the forest service; moreover this man was a stranger, a newcomer to Truchas—one properly subject to distrust by the leader of the Penitentes. How then, the girl wondered, had the liaison come about?

Astonishment gave place to apprehension as the man drew his horse into the shadow of the tree that sheltered her, motioning to Don Tomaso to follow. The girl slipped quickly about the trunk of the tree and crouched there breathless, listening.

The voice of Quintana sounded:

"You bade me attend upon you at once, Señor. . . . I am here."

Montoya remained silent for a space. Three times the red end of his cigarette glowed and faded before he said:

"There is a matter of importance pending, Ricardo —no less a matter than the removal of a thorn from the body of our order."

"A thorn?"

"I speak of Ramon de Vargas . . . . he must die!"

The Mexican's tone was casual as he asked:

"The tool, Señor?"

Montoya spoke with sudden volubility:

"The condemned for long has been a foe to our society, he should have been disposed of before now—yet the task has subtle aspects. The youth is well regarded locally by reason of his name and lineage; his wealth also weighs with many. There is, too, the watchful care of that meddling priest, Father Felipe. We cannot risk having the guilt of his execution laid upon the order——"

"A bullet," broke in the other mildly, "leaves no trace of previous ownership. Nor does a knife-thrust bear the wielder's signature."

"Knives and bullets," observed the Penitente morosely, "do not move of themselves. A hand must guide them."

Ricardo shrugged.

"Hands enough, surely! Are not the members of

our fraternity sworn one and all to carry out your least command?"

"Not one," countered Montoya, "but has a weakness where de Vargas is concerned—not one but dreads the wrath of the protecting priest. Not one but myself—and my enmity toward the youth is too well known." He paused, staring through the darkness at his silent companion. "There is indeed one other—you, Ricardo! You have come but recently to Truchas—I alone know of your affiliation with the brethren of the cross—I alone have seen the credentials you presented at your coming. Should you act, you will be immune from all suspicion of complicity in the affair. It is for this that I have summoned you tonight, to lay my command upon you—slay Ramon!"

Quintana did not start; he showed no sign of surprise or of reluctance to undertake the grewsome task assigned him.

He inquired merely:

"And the manner of Ramon's death, Señor?"

Don Tomaso straightened suddenly as with relief. A note of satisfaction, of eagerness, was in his voice as he replied:

"Even now the youth lingers at the dance with the gringo woman who holds his thoughts for the moment. He will escort her home, doubtless, then set out alone for del Oro—the fool Juan being drunk since midday. One lurking along the road, in ambush on the mesa——"

"Say no more, Don Tomaso," broke in the other, "the matter is clear. . . . A point, however—what

shall you do meanwhile; where shall you be that suspicion may pass you by in the event?"

Montoya hesitated imperceptibly before answering:

"I return to the dance. When Ramon leaves I shall seek out the priest and hold him in talk till the affair be complete. Thus shall he be convinced that a hand other than mine struck the youth down."

They moved from the shadows. Ricardo mounted and said, with a farewell wave of the hand:

"I shall report the outcome in the early hours, Señor. Your house the rendezvous."

He loped off eastward without more ado. Montoya stood a moment watching, then with a grunt of satisfaction turned and strode toward the lighted hall.

For a time Dolores sat on as if enthralled. During the talk she had not moved; she was motionless still. But her heart beat quickly, excitement filled her; a fierce vindictive joy filled her. So soon, it seemed, had her unspoken prayers been answered: vengeance, she deemed, on one unfaithful would be shortly hers.

## CHAPTER XI

### PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT

For a week or more Claire had worked daily on her portrait of Ramon. Sittings took place at the youth's ranch house, where the young artist rode each morning on the horse he had put at her disposal. The picture was progressing well; for the rest their relations, while outwardly unchanged from the status of friendship Claire had insisted on, were drifting imperceptibly but surely in the direction of a closer tie.

Besides the sittings there were rides together, starlit evenings in the *patio* and on the mesa, blithe days when it seemed as if they two were alone in an immensity of space—in a wide world of plains and mountains, of sweet winds under an overarching sky. At such times Claire knew that the attraction Ramon exercised upon her senses was working in her veins, for all she let no inkling of the process reach his consciousness. She knew, too, with the sixth sense women have, that her friend curbed his passion with the greatest difficulty—and then only because he deemed it was her wish. A word from her, a look merely, and barriers would be swept away by the flood of their emotions.

They had appeared seldom in town, under the public

eye. Claire had been warned by Isabel as by Ricardo of the danger of flouting local superstition in regard to her art; or, for that matter, of arousing prejudice by flaunting her association with Ramon. He had long been known as a suitor for Dolores' hand; sympathy was now with Montoya's daughter in the disastrous outcome of that dead romance. Moreover, Claire had not forgotten the note sent her lover by Montoya. She felt that the less often Ramon appeared in the village, among his former friends, the less peril there would be from the feud he had hinted of that first day in the woods.

When the fiesta came her impulse was to avoid its celebration altogether, to spend the day with de Vargas in the mountains; but here the youth balked. Though hostile to the Penitentes he was loyal to the usual observances of his religious faith. He must take his customary part, he averred, in the festivities; his aid and presence were required. Then the dance—would she not, for his comfort, yield him the privilege of escorting her thither on this exceptional occasion?

She gave in at length, the sooner since she loved dancing ardently. They went together to the *baile,* danced to their hearts' content. Yet despite her undoubted pleasure Claire was conscious throughout of a growing depression—a vague premonition of misfortune.

She thought perhaps it was the sight of Dolores, sitting forlornly by the wall, which caused these monitory qualms. She had seen Montoya's daughter daily at the mission school and was no stranger to the girl's

suffering since the break with her former suitor. But tonight that distress seemed to have reached a climax: the girl's pale face, dull with pain, the shadowed eyes staring dumbly as from a waxen mask, haunted Claire through the long evening. So keenly did she feel the other's uncomplaining grief that she spoke of it, against her wont, as Ramon left her at her door, after the dance was done.

"My heart misgives me, Ramon," she said softly, "when I watch Dolores mutely bearing an undeserved affliction. I feel inhuman, truly, to draw happiness from that which causes her sharp pain. That I should have your love, who can live without it; while she starves for the least crumb of your affection—it seems unfair, unjust. It troubles me more than I can say."

His face had hardened as her speech progressed. Yet his voice was gentle as he replied:

"Perhaps the Señorita is fatigued by the dancing—no? Or is it that you weary of my devotion?"

She sighed.

"I value your devotion, Ramon—greatly. It has made up for much that has happened to me—not so pleasing. Perhaps, as you say, I am tired. Tomorrow things will seem different, no doubt. . . . And now, good night, my friend!"

She watched him ride off, straight in the saddle, a noble caballero. She was wondering how men could be so cruel—why women must love them despite their cruelty. Had she plumbed the heart of Dolores, whom she pitied, had she suspected the plot brewing against de Vargas' life, known of Quintana speeding to the

ambush he had undertaken at Montoya's behest, it is possible her mood would have been softer toward her friend as he rode unsuspectingly away. . . .

Upon leaving Don Tomaso the Mexican galloped first east, then north. He seemed no whit disturbed by the sinister nature of his undertaking. The mesa stretched before him inscrutable beneath the stars, yet more inscrutable even than its dim face were the scarred features of the solitary horseman.

Where the boundaries of del Oro began the woods encroached upon the plain in a timbered wedge that reached within a scant two hundred yards of the road; here if anywhere was the apt spot for ambush. Now one watching the rider might have surmised a reason for his apparent callousness; for though he noted the place with an appraising eye he did not check his horse. He merely smiled grimly and gave the animal its head, nor did he draw rein till the dark bulk of the ranch house lay athwart his path.

The place seemed utterly deserted. No lights were visible, no sounds marred the stillness of night. The members of the household were at the fiesta, apparently, disporting themselves in the Saint's honor as good Christians should. Convinced of this the intruder dismounted quickly and strode around the wing of the main building, heading for a group of adobe cabins in the rear.

At the door of each he paused, peering in, listening intently. Presently from the opaque interior of a one-room shack the sound of stertorous breathing

reached his ears. He tiptoed inside and struck a match: on a pile of blankets in the corner he made out the prone form of Juan, de Vargas' Indian servant, sunk in a stupor of unconsciousness.

The man's face was swollen and congested, dark veins stood out ropelike on his temples. A pungent alcoholic odor filled the room.

Ricardo's nostrils curled.

"Don Tomaso spoke the truth concerning this fool's state," he observed, "though indeed 'drunk' is but a feeble word for his condition!"

He surveyed the room briefly, then stepped to the wall and lit a lantern hanging from a wooden peg. The sleeper did not stir.

"Refreshment," decided the intruder, "is clearly necessary."

He dipped water from a tank outside and sluiced it unceremoniously over the head and shoulders of the prone man. The Indian choked and spluttered, his bleared eyes opened. He tried to rise but sank back instantly with a groan, muttering feverish maledictions on the head of his disturber.

Ricardo frowned.

"The mescal in your brain is potent, my friend. It remains to contrive a still more powerful antidote."

Lifting one of the drunkard's gnarled hands, he struck a match and calmly applied the flame to Juan's fingernails. The Indian sprang upright with a roar of rage and pain, wide awake this time.

*"Carramba!"* he bellowed furiously, wringing the

scorched member, "who are you, devil's brother, that would rob Juan of his body's ease?"

For reply the visitor made a quick, mysterious gesture more cogent even than the torture that had preceded it, for the eyes of the Indian rolled fearfully and a look of wondering awe overspread his swarthy face.

Slumping to his knees he grovelled abjectly before the wielder of the mystic passport.

"The sign!" he muttered. "The sign which is death for any but the Head to use!"

The other spoke no word; in silence he drew from his bosom and displayed a small cross of white stone that gleamed red as the lantern light fell upon it. Veneration the most profound entered the dull eyes of the Indian.

"The holy relic, dipped once in Christ's own blood, guarded since by the High Preceptor of the Penitentes! Oft have I heard of the talisman—now my eyes rest upon it! . . . But what do you here, Master, in Juan's humble dwelling?"

Quintana replaced the token carefully. His sombre gaze was fixed unwinkingly on his staring disciple.

"It is a grave secret that you hold in your keeping, brother! To Montoya I have offered merely proofs of membership in the society, hiding my true identity and rank. You, Juan, are the first in whose presence I have laid aside the mask."

A fanatic pride sprang to the Indian's eyes. The High Preceptor, supreme head of all the brethren of the cross, was to him a figure half-mythical, to be

spoken of with bated breath. That this illustrious personage should seek him out, reveal his secret to him—a humble member of the order—seemed a miracle, no less.

"Juan is honored, Greatness!" he breathed.

"It is not honor wholly I would do you," rejoined the other sternly; "I require your aid. And first, I would insure obedience the most implicit to my injunctions."

Juan's eyes opened wide. Would wonders never cease? His aid was asked for—his!

"Say on, Eminence," he muttered, "I shall obey!"

"No one save yourself must for the present dream of my rank and proper titles—is this understood?"

Juan signed himself devoutly.

"So much is sworn, Master!"

The caller nodded.

"That is good. . . . For the rest, I would have you know my errand is one of mercy." He paused, then resumed slowly: "I came hither from the foundation and the shrine in far-off Mexico, called by rumors of gross irregularities in the conduct of the Truchas chapter. I will say nothing now of minor matters—these shall be dealt with as is fitting, in proper sequence. The affair which engages my attention at the moment is more pressing—no less a thing than a plot against the life of your master, Don Ramon."

Astonishment marked the face of the listener.

"A plot against Don Ramon? But who would harm my master? There is not his like in all the region for

goodness of heart, for true nobility. All in Truchas revere him."

An ironic smile touched the other's lips.

"Montoya—does Montoya revere him?"

Juan's face darkened ominously. His huge hands clenched.

"Is it Montoya, Señor, who threatens the well-being of Don Ramon?"

Ricardo spoke with brusque decisiveness:

"Enough, I have warned you! It may be that Montoya holds the youth's non-conformity as a pretext to mask his personal enmity, would inflame sentiment against him on that ground. It may be that I do not warn Don Ramon directly, knowing well his rash courage—or it may be that I would keep knowledge of the affair limited to members of our band. Be that as it may, I tell you that de Vargas is in deadly peril. Even tonight, while you lay here in drunken sleep, myself saved him from the hand of the assassin. . . . Yet I cannot be everywhere. Henceforth yours is the responsibility to guard your master every hour, every minute—be his shadow, his shield. Bring me prompt news of aught untoward that happens; we are from tonight joint protectors of the youth. . . . As for this,"—he indicated the jar of mescal by the wall—"let not this enemy betray you further. Is all clear?"

The Indian's face expressed a dogged resolution. He took up the jar and calmly poured its contents on the ground outside the door.

"No more shall Juan yield to the astuteness of the

Evil One," he said gravely, "nor will he neglect the duties you have pointed out. . . . But yourself, are you not in danger also? Your high office, your sacred body——"

"Peril is part and parcel of my life, brother. . . . God keep you—farewell!"

He passed from the hut while Juan bowed low before him. A moment later the rattle of horse's hoofs sounded in diminishing staccato.

The Indian cast an awed glance about the room wherein so short a time since sanctity had moved and spoken. He fell to his knees, thrusting his arm high above his head.

"May the Saints guide this arm, sharpen this dull brain of mine! If there be choice let this useless body feel the pangs of death that my master be saved thereby!"

## CHAPTER XII

### AN ALLY FOR MONTOYA

At the point on the ranch's boundaries where the woods drew in Ricardo turned his horse toward the timber, dismounted at its edge, and sat down calmly with his back against a juniper tree. He rolled and lit a cigarette, puffing slowly. He was thinking of many things, but chiefly of a certain desperate undertaking on which he had embarked—a venture he hoped fervently no one but himself in Truchas was aware of. What this enterprise was must wait its proper place: enough that in its conduct the Mexican found himself in direct opposition to Montoya and his plans.

For the present he deemed it essential that he play a waiting game, keeping his main purpose hidden while securing such information as he could concerning Don Tomaso's moves. With this in mind he had called upon Juan and brought him smartly to heel. By using the leverage of the Indian's devotion to his master and his own pretensions to power in the mystic order, he had secured, he believed, a trustworthy assistant in the struggle opening before him.

Ramon would be safer, too, with Juan forewarned—though as to this Ricardo was not overly concerned. All he knew was that he himself had no least intention

of killing the young rancher: Montoya must think him a fool indeed to imagine he would put his neck thus lightly into a noose!

But he had no love for Ramon himself. That much was obvious from the grim look he cast on the youth when at length he came in sight, riding homeward along the road alone.

"The irony of fate, hombre," he muttered, "that I should save your life!"

He pinched out his cigarette and mounted as soon as de Vargas was well away, then loped leisurely townward to the dwelling of Montoya.

Don Tomaso arrived home in the small hours. He was in high good humor at the trend of events; by this, he hoped, he was well rid of his young enemy without the slightest danger of being charged with the crime of his destruction. That lay on Ricardo's head—a head of little value, the Penitente reflected pleasantly, to any one save its unimportant owner.

But as he perceived the dejected face of his emissary, who arose from the threshold at his approach, his own brow grew suddenly dark.

"What news, Ricardo?" he demanded. "And why do you appear thus with a mien of ill-omen instead of the glad face of duty done?"

The Mexican gazed up at him sulkily.

"The man bears a charmed life—" he began, but stopped at the other's furious countenance.

Montoya's clenched hand was uplifted, his lips worked soundlessly; then abruptly he lowered his hand

and led the way into the living-room, where he threw logs on the glowing embers that lay on the hearth.

"Speak!" he ordered harshly, "and to a prompt issue!"

Quintana's frank face was troubled. His voice held a note of mild apology.

"No one, Don Tomaso, could do more than I——"

"Speak, man—do not spin out your words! How did the dog escape you?

A sullen look came into the Mexican's eyes. No fault of his, the look seemed to say, if the affair, so well-planned, so faithfully executed, had miscarried.

"I lay hidden in the brush where the de Vargas land begins—at the edge of the timber not two hundred yards from the road. You know the spot, Don Tomaso?"

"I know all," rejoined the other sourly, "save the reason for your failure."

"Well, then, I waited there till a horseman approached by the road from Truchas—a rider on a black horse with one white foot——"

"A horse, numbskull, which I have seen daily since he was foaled. No need to quote his points. The rider was de Vargas?"

"None other, Señor. . . . I laid my carbine in rest, aiming for the head. It is better so; a head wound means quick death and no tales told, whereas a bullet through the lungs, the body——"

"Peace—peace! You missed then?"

Ricardo's face assumed a perplexed expression.

"The devil protected him—that only can explain

the curious fact! At the distance I am deadly with the rifle—I cannot miss. My sights are trained—I see the head above and forward of the ear. I fire; the hat of de Vargas leaps from his head—he is unharmed. With the speed of thought he whirls his horse and drives full tilt toward me. No one, Señor, not cherished of the Evil One would hazard his life thus——"

"And you?"

"I fire once more, aiming this time at the heart—a larger target. With the report the horse of Don Ramon stumbles—falls. The rider—still under protection—leaps unhurt to his feet and advances on foot, firing his revolver as he comes. Bullets fly about me—scatter twigs and leaves upon me. The thought comes, is it wise to linger, facing one befriended of the Fiend?"

Disgust lay on Montoya's bony visage.

"Your gun was not yet empty?"

The facile raconteur shrugged.

"My gun? What is a gun in such case, Señor? I fire—yes; the lock jams. I am defenseless. Just time have I to mount and escape through the woods; lucky in that the youth's mount has fallen and cannot be spurred in pursuit. . . . I make my way here—perhaps an hour since, to await your coming. That is the tale, Señor!"

Montoya's stare was deadly; he struggled for control ere he remarked with bitter scorn:

"You have bungled the matter beyond repair. . . . Did de Vargas recognize you, think you?"

"God grant the contrary," replied Quintana earnestly. He paused, a reflective look in his eyes, then said: "I have pondered the outcome of the affair at length while waiting for you here—the thought emerges, would it not be wise—since the youth obviously is in the keeping of the Father of Sin—to invoke the united power of our order for his destruction rather than trust to the ministrations of a single executioner, however competent?"

The Penitente was silent for a space, glaring at the marplot with a glance of mingled wrath and suspicion. Quintana had not heretofore impressed him as the stupid clod his words and manner implied; on the other hand there had been no earlier test of the man's true mettle. There could not, Don Tomaso assured himself, be aught hidden beneath this inefficient mien; Ricardo's eyes were guileless as a child's, his soft-voiced tones held nothing of duplicity.

The doubt died out of the gaunt Spaniard's regard. He waved a brusque hand.

"Begone, bungler—the sight of you has become a burden to my eyes! No word of what has transpired—this as you value life, my friend!"

With a murmured *adios* the youth quitted the room and the house. When he had won safely outside he threw a backward look in which appeared faintly derisive mirth.

"For the moment, old fox, your teeth are pulled," he murmured. "Now lies between us a duel to the death—whose death, and when, time only will divulge!"

The Penitente sat on alone, chewing the bitter cud of disappointment. He had, he conceded gloomily, been deceived in the instrument he had chosen for his purpose. Ricardo might be loyal, but he was an arrant fool!

He had voiced this unpalatable conclusion aloud, with emphasis, when he started at a cool voice behind him.

"I am not certain of this one's loyalty—to you, my father; nor yet that he is a fool. But if he be a fool, it is well to remember that sometimes from the mouths of fools drops wisdom."

Dolores stood beside him. The swaying curtain from whose shelter she had stepped showed the nature of her hiding-place.

The brow of Don Tomaso lowered. Was he to be spied upon, he asked himself bitterly, even in the bosom of his household? His lips parted to rebuke the eavesdropper, but no words came; for even as they trembled on his lips he stopped in wonder at the coldness of his daughter's tones, the unfamiliar hardness of her face.

The girl saw the amazement in his eyes and answered it ere he could question her.

"Recently, in this very room, I pleaded with you for the life of Don Ramon de Vargas. Yet now, since I have fathomed his black treachery, I shall mourn while he lives and rejoice at tidings of his death."

Don Tomaso stared, a look of incredulity on his countenance. What meant the girl by this abrupt

about-face, this sudden hatred of one she had so lately loved?

A thought solved his quandary. In his mind's eye he saw Ramon and the fair Americano circling in the dance, Dolores, neglected and thrice shamed, seated by the wall, gazing at the scene with anguish in her eyes.

"It is the artist, the heretic—Ramon's new light of love!"

She nodded curtly.

"Even so. . . . Had Ramon yielded to fate our separation would have pained me, yet would my heart have still been faithful to him through all. Had his love weakened by the long attrition of time, I could have forgiven him, perhaps. But that while still warm he should have cast aside our love—laid his false heart down at another's feet—ah, that is beyond forgiveness. . . . We are one now, Father, in our desire for vengeance on the traitor!"

Montoya's face shone. It was a woman's reasoning, he granted; yet the girl's motivation was unimportant beside the fact of her support. She was an ally not to be despised.

"You spoke of Ricardo," he prompted eagerly, "and of a truth fallen from his lips."

She frowned.

"Why, yes, Father. Can you not see that a single assassin, however astute, must be discovered—if not that, suspicion of the deed will fall inevitably on the Penitentes? Better that the band be won to condemn de Vargas as a body, in their support lies your

strength—thus far was Quintana right. The brethren will then stand together—behind you. With their aid to countenance the deed you can defy the law, the priest whom you fear——"

"But—excommunication?"

Dolores shrugged.

"Better be cast out of the Church with your companions than alone. . . . And de Vargas will trouble us no more—there is the issue!"

The Penitente gnawed his lip in a fever of indecision.

"If the brethren are to be won to countenance the death of de Vargas, how may the miracle of their conversion be accomplished?"

The girl gazed at him fixedly.

"A plan has occurred to me—a plan that should effect the end desired. I shall unfold it to you, Father!"

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE COMPACT

Mass was over in Truchas' church. Dark-skinned worshippers—women with black shawls about their heads, men with wide sombreros and stiff boots—emerged from the cool interior to blink in the warm brilliance of the September sun. They lingered in knots and clusters about the entrance, waiting with a veiled expectancy for some foreseen dénouement.

Presently a stir went through the various groups, eyes centered on the white-pillared doorway. Ramon de Vargas appeared, on his arm the fair stranger—the Americano with whom gossip recently had been so busily concerned. She was beautiful—that none could gainsay; as for the rest the least said the better—though much was passed from lip to lip notwithstanding.

She was, charged the more daring, affianced to the Evil One. Did she not deal in forbidden crafts—preserve in the strong hues of life features and forms of sinful mortals perishable by the nature of their being? Had she not, as all knew by now, cast a spell on Ramon that he neglected earlier devoirs—even the business of the ranch, his splendid heritage? Did she not make daily assignations with the youth, meet him unattended, spend long hours in his company? Were not

the facts vouched for solemnly by sundry fortunate observers? . . . The shame passed all belief!

Ramon's head was high, he seemed unaware of his curious fellow villagers. His companion, on the contrary, glanced about her interestedly, amused, apparently, by the commotion her appearance caused. Her trunks had come by freight-wagon soon after her arrival; she wore white, summery clothes and a large hat with drooping brim from which her face peered out as from a frame. In this light armor she met the scowling looks that greeted her with an unvarying smile.

She knew, roughly, what the people were thinking and saying. From Isabel and others she had learned of the cumulative storm of disapproval her conduct was causing locally. Since the fiesta two weeks ago criticism seemed to have achieved point and venom; her presentiment of ill-fortune at that time appeared to have been grounded on reality, after all. She had determined to accept the situation, however; to ignore gossip and hostile demonstrations so far as possible. What she did not realize, in making this decision, was the existence of certain undercurrents at work against her, influences secret but deftly designed for her destruction. . . . Of these she was to hear that very morning.

Shortly after her return home from church a caller was announced—no less a personage than Father Felipe. Isabel, inventing an excuse to disappear, left them alone together. Instantly Claire discovered that the visitor was examining her with an appraising eye;

she felt sure that the meeting had been prearranged, that the priest had come to see her with a definite purpose in mind.

"You were at Mass today, Señorita," he began smoothly; "that is well. . . . Not yet, however, have you attended the confessional!"

Her face was demure.

"I'm afraid you'll find me more than half a heathen, Father!"

The caller shook a regretful head.

"The Señorita Otero has confided to me something of your spiritual state—she fears for your salvation, my child!"

A faint smile hovered about the girl's lips. She was wondering when the other would come to the point.

It is possible that Father Felipe guessed her thought, for he said bluntly:

"I came today not to chide you for a lack of piety, Señorita, but to impress on you the peril of your flagrant liaison with Don Ramon de Vargas."

Claire stared, speechless. This was direct speaking with a vengeance! She could not but admire the other's forthrightness, even while indignation at his assumption rose hot within her.

He went on quickly:

"Mind you, I do not charge that you have sinned irrevocably! In your own eyes you may be innocent of all wrong-doing—yet in the eyes of my people you are already adjudged guilty of the worst!"

"Much good may it do them!" raged Claire. "The—the idiots!"

The priest's face was grave. His shrewd eyes were fixed on his companion in an intent, unwinking regard.

"Your comment is beside the point—as is, indeed, the question of the truth or falsity of the indictment. What is important is that you realize the nature of your position—the very real danger that encompasses you. . . . Will you be frank with me?"

"I have nothing to hide, Father—nothing!"

He smiled grimly.

"*Bueno!* . . . You came to Truchas to paint, as I understand the matter—for no other reason?"

"To paint—and rest. . . . I knew Isabel Otero, my one-time schoolmate——"

"You knew of the local bias against artists—that religious subjects only were thought fit material for the painter's brush?"

"I learned that only after I arrived. Indeed, it was that which first led me to seek Don Ramon as a model. I wanted local types—I found myself blocked on all sides. Even the children screamed with fright when they found me drawing them. Don Ramon, free from the general superstition, consented to sit for me. . . . That is the whole story!"

Father Felipe's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"Is that in truth," he asked gently, "the whole story?"

The girl's face grew slowly crimson. It was not, she knew well enough, the whole story. Yet why, she asked herself resentfully, should she reveal more than this to the inquisitive priest?

He leaned forward earnestly.

"I would help you, Señorita—believe me! But you must trust me; that is essential. . . . You will not deny that Don Ramon has owned his love for you? Don Ramon, who before your coming was said to have been affianced to the daughter of Montoya?"

The blood left her face suddenly. Her voice was cold as she replied:

"That question, Father, is obviously one for Don Ramon himself to answer."

Her interlocutor smiled imperturbably.

"It is already answered—the fact is common knowledge. . . . But your regard for him—how strong has it become? Do you amuse yourself with the spectacle of his infatuation, or are you serious in the affair? Will you wed Don Ramon?"

For a breath explosion seemed imminent. The girl's blue eyes flashed, her lips opened on a quick retort. Then suddenly she recognized the other's right, from his standpoint, to question her. She was in a sense an interloper; had come unasked from the world outside to set the whole town by the ears. Truchas was the priest's province, its people his charges to oversee and guide. Small wonder that he felt it his privilege to discover her attitude in the premises.

She felt, too, that for some reason he was friendly toward her—would help her as he said, though for his own ends. In the circumstances it seemed to her that frankness on one point at least might be advisable.

As to the nature and extent of my feelings, Father," she said slowly, "I cannot speak—what matters it in any case so long as I control them? But this much

I will say—and it is final: I shall never wed de Vargas!"

For a long moment he stared at her as if he would read her inmost thoughts; then his stern face relaxed.

"That is good—very good." He leaned back in his chair, brought the fingertips of his hands together. "There will be little difficulty, then," he added mildly, "in your resigning for a time the pleasure of Don Ramon's companionship."

Claire's eyes opened wide

"You mean?"

"Señorita Otero tells me that you intend to stay on here indefinitely. That being so, I warn you—till the present situation changes you and Don Ramon must not be seen together; you must not meet for any reason!"

She laughed shortly.

"I am fond of Ramon, Father. Moreover, his portrait is but half done. Why, because I have said I would not marry him, must the alternative be to shun him?"

"Because," the priest returned gravely, "to do otherwise means death to him—to you also, perhaps! . . . You have heard of the Penitentes?"

"Of course," she returned; "and I have heard as well that I have already earned their disapproval. But do you not, Father, exaggerate their will to evil—or their power?"

For a space the priest said nothing. His face was calmly meditative.

"I shall tell you of what happened to a youth who came to Truchas not so long ago," he said presently, "a youth incredulous as are you concerning the strength and the vindictiveness of the dark brethren. . . . He was a writer—would probe the secrets of the order and publish them to the world."

"And—?" she prompted when he paused.

"And," he rejoined, "one morning this young man was found on the mesa, buried to the neck in sand—in close proximity to a colony of giant ants. It is said—though I myself cannot vouch for the truth of the indictment—that the Penitentes had passed judgment on the stranger—and executed him."

"But—how terrible! Was nothing done about it?"

Father Felipe shrugged.

"What could be done? There was no proof—suspicion only. The youth's slayers are at large today—perhaps waiting merely for other victims: Ramon and yourself, possibly!"

Claire shivered involuntarily.

"Yet this youth was a stranger, and concededly inimical to the order, whereas Ramon——"

"Ramon," broke in the priest, "has always declined to join the society. For this reason Don Tomaso Montoya refused the hand of his daughter Dolores to de Vargas, whereupon the youth plunged straightway into a desperate flirtation with yourself. This, coupled with your art, has been the subject of a growing scandal in Truchas. So much you know, I take it. What perhaps you have not learned is that Montoya, who hates Ramon, has used the facts as a foundation on

which to erect a structure of intrigue. Of late he has been using all his influence against you both, enlarging upon truth, inflaming local feeling, working night and day to the end that sentence of death be passed upon you by the Penitente council. If this occurs—nothing can save you."

Claire felt weak as the situation became plain to her. She was alone, surrounded by enemies. Isabel was on her side—but Isabel was without power to aid her. She did not yet wholly trust the priest. There was Ramon——!

"I must tell Ramon of this," she cried; "take counsel with him that we may escape——"

"And sign his death-warrant?" queried the other sharply.

She gazed at him uncertainly.

"Think you I would not myself have warned de Vargas, did I not foresee the effect on his impetuous nature of the disclosure? He is watched night and day. Nothing would please Montoya more than an assault by the youth which would justify his murder. . . . No, Señorita, there is but one chance for you both—see, I will betray a trust: this week the order holds its monthly meeting—Montoya will attack you in the conclave. But you will be defended—I will see to that if you but follow my ruling meanwhile. . . . No word to de Vargas, no meeting with him till the council has returned a verdict. May I not count on you for this?"

His utter earnestness, the fervor of his speech carried conviction. Claire felt that she must trust to

his discretion. And a week merely—that was not long; it could be managed.

She burst out impulsively:

"You can count on me, Father! No word to Ramon, no meeting with him till you tell me it is safe!"

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE FIRE GUARD

THE carrying out of her pledged purpose to avoid Ramon, Claire found more difficult by far than its mere formulation. Her troubles began on the day following her talk with Father Felipe. She had agreed to meet Ramon that morning at Rancho del Oro, for a sitting; she determined to ignore the engagement. But scarcely half an hour had elapsed beyond the time set, when the hoofbeats of a running horse sounded outside and Juan knocked at the door.

Claire herself admitted the Indian, who handed her a note with the brief comment: "A message from my master, Señorita!" She took the missive with apparent calm, though her heart beat disquietingly.

She read the scrawled contents with a pensive look.

"*Cara mia*: I await you, the time appointed is past and overpast—why do you not come? I would myself ride to seek you did I not hope that you may appear at any moment. If this word reaches you, set my mind at rest, I pray you!"

She crumpled the sheet absently, wondering what to do. She had agreed not to communicate with Ramon —yet this urgent note obviously required attention. The spirit of her compact, she decided, would be

best served by a plain statement of her intentions—then silence.

"Tell your master," she said to the messenger, "that necessity keeps me from him for a time. I cannot explain now further. But assure him that I act for the best, from reasoned judgment rather than from any wish to lose the pleasure of his companionship."

"I will tell Don Ramon," returned the man, and mounted his steaming horse.

The girl stood looking after him as he galloped off, her face thoughtful. It occurred to her, too late, that her impulsive message might have an effect other than that she had intended—that Ramon might be impelled to seek her out in person and demand a clearer explanation of her sudden resolution. Such a meeting must be avoided, that was plain. She decided to saddle her horse—seek the woods and solitude.

Apprising Isabel of her plan, she set out without delay and took the mountain trail that led from the flat at the town's eastern edge. The forest reserve was threaded by many such trails, part of the Government's intricate fire protective system. The district ranger and his men knew where each one led; to Claire they were merely ways into the unknown. Yet she did not doubt that she could find her way out as easily as she was entering the woods.

She rode slowly, letting her horse choose his own gait, drinking in with a grateful sense of peace the stillness, the cool impersonal aloofness of the forest. Tall pines shaded the trail, sparse undergrowth grew beneath the trees. The coil of the girl's thoughts was

smoothed, she could envisage her affairs objectively for the first time in days. Her entanglement with Ramon fell for the time being into right proportion with the general scheme of her existence. Life was a jewel of many facets; why focus too exclusively on one, however alluring?

The winding trail grew steeper as it led upward. Claire found at length that she was climbing a long ridge. As she approached its summit the trees thinned, the view southward and westward opened out: mile upon mile of moving green, the mesa beyond with the little town at its southeastern rim.

Turning to her course once more, she saw through treetops ahead the towering mass of Truchas Peak, on its face the cross larger than it had ever seemed before. An intervening hilltop blocked the view; in a cleared space on its highest point was a crude log cabin before which sat a man, staring at the wide forest spread out beneath him.

Claire frowned with vexation. For the moment she felt that the silent watcher not herself was an intruder—he had destroyed a spell. . . . Then her face cleared as she recognized Quintana, the fire guard; she had, she realized, come unawares upon his station.

He turned at her hail and waved to her with a faint smile of welcome.

"So you have found me out, Señorita?"

There was, she thought, a question in his eyes other than that one his words expressed. She answered him with a light laugh:

"An accident purely! I was riding at hazard, seeking nature—and I find you!"

The badinage, once it had escaped her, left her mildly astonished at her attitude toward the man. She did not know why, but from the first moment she had seen him clearly, on the evening of her arrival, he had seemed a friend. She felt that she could rely on him, if need be; felt, too, that beneath his unimpressive exterior, under the wrappings of his insignificant position there was a personality fearless, wise and generously loyal. . . . Perhaps, she guessed, the feeling was prompted by his resemblance to someone she had known.

He was consulting a watch, frowning reflectively.

"If the Señorita wishes—it is time I rode to the lookout on the Peak and back: will you ride with me? The view from there I can recommend without reservation."

The ridge they stood on, she saw now, was a shoulder springing from the larger mountain a mile or more distant. She had often wanted a nearer view of the great cross; this chance would afford her the opportunity she desired.

She agreed to his suggestion eagerly.

"But can you leave your station?"

"Assuredly. . . . I watch for fires, as you know. A trail leads from here to the lookout on the Peak; from points along the trail I can see even more of the forest than from here— From the lookout the country is visible for many miles. Twice a day I make

the ride—once in the morning, once in the late afternoon."

While speaking he had been busy loosing a hobbled horse that stood nearby, saddled and bridled. He mounted and set out along the trail, the girl following after.

They rode for an hour before reaching their destination, but once there Claire felt well repaid for her trouble. The lookout was built high up on the mountain side, at the edge of timber line, just below the rocky summit of the Peak on which the cross was graven. They faced south; the whole broad range stretched endlessly before them, ridge after timbered ridge, with the silver threads of streams along the canyons between. The millions of trees seemed to form a tapestry close-woven and thick. In the clear air the spacious outlines of the hills rose and fell gracefully like waves, green nearby, with hues more delicate as distance intervened. At the horizon's edge they seemed to melt into the sky.

"We are on top of the world now," said the girl raptly; "the kingdoms of the earth seem small in this perspective!"

Ricardo had dismounted and was sweeping the watershed with a keen glance. No smoke was visible. He relaxed and turned to his companion with his unvarying faint smile.

"The mountains hold a message for us, Señorita—if we would but take it. There is silence everywhere, but the trees and the hills speak to the heart in a language of their own."

"What do they say, Ricardo?"

He shook his head soberly.

"I think to different people they say different things —that is their magic. To me they whisper of the vanity of human ambition; of the validity of truth and honor; of the reality of death. . . . To you, perhaps, they would speak a word of warning, an admonition to guard your courage——"

"You think me not courageous?"

He gazed at her fixedly.

"I think you will need all your courage, Señorita, before many hours have passed!"

Claire clenched her hands, which had become suddenly unsteady. What did this stranger know, how far had he plumbed her secret—the secret but half-acknowledged to herself? He had been a witness of that first scene in the glade with Ramon, she remembered; doubtless had heard gossip of her conduct since. But he had said he was on her side, would aid her if he could! She was aware suddenly that she believed him, that despite the caution of experience she trusted him.

"Is love, Ricardo," she broke out, "a blessing or a curse?"

His face did not change as he replied:

"Love is a force, Señorita, in itself neither good nor evil. As we misuse it, or apply it wisely, does it work harm or benefit."

She gestured impatiently.

"But how can one know when—or whom—to love?"

"We learn from life, Señorita—by living!"

Her lips curled bitterly.

"So I thought once; now I am not so sure. I have lived—to my sorrow. I came to Truchas, out of the world, to find peace and a chance to work. And now—here——"

"Yes, Señorita?"

"I thought I had learned my lesson, won control of my emotions, if not actual happiness. Yet even now —I find I cannot rule my heart, Ricardo!"

He did not smile; there was a shadow in his half-closed eyes.

"You have no quarrel with love, Señorita, as you imagine—but with life. It is life that has hurt you—that and your own unhappy ignorance. . . . Your choice in love has been unfortunate."

"But how can one know? What is to tell one if the loved person is worthy or unworthy?"

He stared at her without speaking, for a long moment. It seemed that a struggle went on in his mind. At length he spoke, abruptly, harshly as it appeared to her:

"I can tell you, if you wish, in the present instance. . . . Your infatuation for Don Ramon de Vargas, Señorita, bears the seeds of disaster only. Happiness lies not that way for you!"

Her face flushed slowly. She realized with his words whither her momentary weakness had led her. That she should have been drawn to discuss with her former guide a thing so secret and so intimate seemed to her a matter for humiliation.

Ricardo noted the signals in her cheeks, in her averted eyes; and read the signs aright.

"Forgive me!" he said quickly. "No words—mine least of all—will mend the situation that oppresses you. Yet I will say this, that there are others besides yourself involved in the affair whose fringes we have touched. Soon, perhaps, I can tell you more of what I know—but not now, Señorita. Now I would have you trust me merely, know that I am working in your interests."

She rose to her feet and cast a last look about her. The cross on the rock face of the huge cliff above loomed impressively over them—yet at close range its lines seemed rough and crudely made; the effect was of a thing flawed in the making.

"The cross looks better from a distance," she commented, in an attempt at diversion.

Ricardo smiled grimly.

"As do many of our idols, Señorita. . . . The details cannot stand the light of close inspection."

"Yet the symbol stands," she returned bravely; "it weathers time. So are its worshippers consoled for its defects."

The fire guard gazed reflectively below, where a mass of broken rock strewed the steep mountainside.

"That rock slide beneath us was once part of the cliff above. The whole mountain hangs together loosely, shaken in ages past by the earth's moving crust. Some day, Señorita—any day—the cliff and the cross on its face may fall—plunge to the valley

bed in a cataclysm of destruction. . . . The cross, like any other mundane thing, is doomed!"

Her lips were parted for reply, but she stopped as the man's eyes widened suddenly, went beyond her. She turned and saw rising from the slope farther down a thin column of smoke, sure warning of a forest fire beginning.

"I must leave you, Señorita—nothing must take precedence of a fire starting in the woods. . . . It seems small as yet—will you await my return, or ride back by the trail we came on?"

"I will ride back," she decided; "the way is plain."

He vanished over the edge of the rim as she spoke, was working his way downward toward the smoke. Claire watched him for a moment, then turned her horse's head south and rode along the trail.

She had reached the ridge, was threading her way in the direction of the fire station half way down. So absorbed was she in her thoughts that she failed to see a horseman standing in the narrow path. She had approached to within fifty feet of him before she raised her head to see Ramon, silent, motionless as a mounted statue, awaiting her.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE ATTACK

CLAIRE rode forward calm-faced and steady-eyed, though the unexpected appearance of Ramon dumfounded her. Juan had delivered her message, was her thought; Ramon had followed her post-haste, as she had feared he might, to thresh the matter of her message out with her. It was unfortunate—yet it could not be helped now. All that remained for her to do was to repeat the fact of her decision to him, describe it as irrevocable.

She had no inkling as yet of the suspicion that lodged in the youth's breast. His first words therefore startled her:

"Is it well, think you, Señorita, to betray one who worships you?"

"Betray you, Ramon?" she echoed in amazement, "is not the word ill-chosen?"

He frowned blackly, said with quick passion:

"What other word will serve? You fail to meet me at the ranch as agreed. To my note you send a vague and shifty answer. I ride to question you as to the meaning of your message—the Señorita Otero tells me you have ridden out, where she cannot tell. I follow your trail, find you in the company of one

whom I perceive to be a rival—one from whose side you even now return——"

"Nonsense, Ramon!"

Claire's indignation at his charge melted before the absurd nature of the facts, as she knew them. She laughed ironically.

"Do not be a child! If it be jealousy that moves you, know that you have no slightest grounds for the emotion!"

His face was stony. He turned his horse aside, out of the trail.

"Since the matter affords you entertainment, Señorita, I should be content. I do not suffer, it seems, in vain!"

She bit her lip; her laughter died out suddenly. The grounds of their misunderstanding might be fantastic, but the young rancher was unquestionably serious. She must, she feared, betray something of what the priest had revealed to her to justify herself in her lover's eyes.

She rode straight toward him, glancing meanwhile on either hand. At this point in the trail, she noted, they were screened by brush.

"I will break a promise," she said, "to set your mind at ease. I will tell you what it was decided me to cancel our intimacy for a time. . . . But you must agree to take no steps based on the knowledge you acquire. We must act together—in harmony, for our own good."

The youth's face altered abruptly.

"So that you have not changed, Señorita—so that

you have not tired of Ramon; that is all I ask!"

She smiled at his eagerness.

"I have not changed," she said.

Briefly she described their situation as she had learned it from the priest, stressing the need for caution on her lover's part, for a joint agreement to refrain from seeing one another till the meeting of the Penitentes had been held.

"The crux," she ended, "is here: Montoya, wishing you no good—yet withholding his hand through fear of consequences, makes capital of our close friendship to incite his followers against us, to the end that our sin, as he conceives it, may be punished by the order as a body."

Ramon's face was wrathful.

"My own peril is nothing," he burst out; "I fear Montoya no whit. But that you, Señorita, should be placed in jeopardy——"

"Father Felipe thinks that we may yet weather the affair—if we are careful. He has hopes that with the meeting of the Penitentes the crisis may come, and pass. We will be defended in the assembly, he assures me, provided no further fuel be furnished to the fire of gossip that prevails. To this end he urged me to avoid you. And that you might not be led to move rashly, a contingency he frankly fears, he begged me to await the verdict of the council before acquainting you with the foregoing facts."

"Would that I could attend this council," muttered Ramon, "to hurl the lie in Montoya's teeth! That

they should accuse you—pure and unsullied as a wood's flower—of such misconduct——"

Claire laughed lightly.

"That is the least factor of my anxiety. . . . Truly, one feels like being really wicked in such a case! One has the name, why not the game as well?"

Ramon's eyes grew sombre. He cried earnestly:

"Ah, Señorita—if you would but give your heart into my keeping! How quickly would we leave this nest of intrigue, of scandalous imagining! How dearly would I cherish you—make you my own for time and for eternity!"

"You would leave Truchas—your home, your friends? Go with me into the world outside—my world?"

"At once," he cried; "where you are there will I make my home!"

His face was glowing, passion leapt naked from his eyes. Claire's mind failed suddenly and became weak. The words of the priest, the warning of Quintana faded. Her heart beat stronger and sent the blood rushing through her veins. Her variable moods merged into a single channel of feeling. No longer did she fear the future, question her fate. No fate so sweet, she felt, as to be swept along by love—on to a goal dim but most desirable!

She was staring at him, wide-eyed. Ramon read in her eyes the dawning of consent. He sprang from his horse, stepped quickly to her side and threw his arms about her. His lips met hers.

"You will be mine, *cara mia?* You will set at

naught the envious gossip that poisons all the air? . . . Once wed, and we shall laugh at the menace of Montoya and his band!"

Claire's cheeks were carmine; her eyes were filled with light.

"For this hour at least I think—I love you, Ramon! I think that I could be content to go to the ends of the earth with you—to cleave to you whatever betide. . . . But marriage—ah, no! That is denied us!"

Her lover stiffened at her words. A look of bewilderment grew in his face.

"You will not marry me?"

She shook her head slowly.

"It is not that I will not, Ramon—but that I cannot. I am a wife already!"

The boy's face was blank, as if he had been struck and stunned.

"I have never felt bound by my marriage," she went on blindly. "I was tricked into wedlock; there was no love on either side. I was younger then, knew little of the world and its ways. When I found out the truth, I tried to keep my disappointment from the public eye. I never sought legal freedom; I thought that I was done with love and its sad counterfeits. . . . . So though I love you, I cannot marry you. But that, if you see with my eyes, need not deter us. My marriage, except on the legal side, has been and is a farce——"

"A farce?"

She started and stared wonderingly at his face. Was

she dreaming, or did aversion lie in his astonished eyes?

"Ramon!" she cried fearfully, "what is it? Why do you look so?"

"You are married? Joined irrevocably to another by the rites of the Church? You call that fact a farce—*aie,* Holy Mother!"

"Yes," she said bitterly; "the Church presided—yet love was lacking. No true union there—a mockery merely. Surely you see that, Ramon!"

She could not yet believe that his horror was real. Her arms went out to him; but he ignored them. His face had hardened, he threw out a repellent hand.

"That I was innocent, God knows! Yet how close to deadly sin! I would have taken you—fled in your company . . . . both would have been damned! The Saints are good that they have saved us from that evil thing!"

She stared with a perplexed air; then as the genuineness of his fear grew plain she laughed wildly, kept laughing as if she could not stop.

"To think," she said at length, "that I did not foresee your scruples, that I thought you liberal, a man, not a homunculus; that I thought you loved me who love only yourself! You who let a mumbled sentence and a band of gold keep us apart! Your love—a shallow, vaporous desire vanquished by ghostly obstacles! Your courage—a mist that disappears before the knowledge of an empty ceremony! . . . What fools are we —twin fools: I to desire, you to renounce the substance for the shadow! Ramon, Ramon!"

Her scornful words stung him like small whips. His face flushed red; yet fear still troubled the depths of his regard.

His lips opened for speech, but in that moment she saw his lips close again sharply; his eyes went beyond her, opened wide. His hand was slipping to the leather holster at his side when a gun crashed behind her; Ramon swayed and fell heavily.

She screamed with terror, but a heavy hand on her mouth cut short the cry. A cloak was wound about her head. She felt herself being lifted in strong arms, carried bodily from the spot.

## CHAPTER XVI

### RICARDO MOVES

As the fire guard had surmised, the blaze he sought was but a small one, recently started. The flames, when he reached them, had burned over several yards of brush; Ricardo extinguished them speedily. He stood then, the pine branch he had used to fight the fire still in his hand, staring at the blackened, smoking area, a puzzled look in his eyes.

Who, he wondered, could have started this conflagration? What could the motive of so wanton an act have been? There were no campers near; the penalty for the deed was harsh. What object had been his who was responsible? Quintana shook his head, nonplussed. . . . It was at this moment that a shot sounded and a piercing scream from the ridge above reached his ears—Claire's voice, if he was not at fault!

A quick suspicion of the truth flashed into his mind; they had been watched by the enemy, he had been decoyed from his companion's side—but what grim fate was hers? With a curse on his own innocence he leapt at the rugged hillside and stormed furiously upward in the direction of the sound.

The top was a hundred yards or more from where he started. He made what speed he could; his clothes

were torn by brush, his breath came sobbing from congested lungs. But when he reached the summit precious minutes had elapsed—the trail stretched empty before his eager eyes.

Quickly he ran forward, following the hoofprints of her mount—a difficult task in that the tracks of other horses mixed with hers. But when he came to the spot where she had met Ramon he had no trouble in deciding that here the assault had taken place. There were the marks of men's feet, deep grooves where a startled pony had shied and leapt aside—blood on the ground!

He knelt to examine these evidences of a struggle —then sprang abruptly to his feet at the sound of a voice behind him.

"Master!" came the voice of Juan, "you here!"

Ricardo breathed relief as his eyes fell upon de Vargas' servant. The man was afoot, his face dripped sweat, his eyes protruded from the violence of his exertions.

"You heard the cry of the Señorita?" queried Quintana sharply. "Know you aught of what occurred?"

The other shook his head.

"It was my hope that the Señor might have seen. . . . I have been following my master from the fire guard's camp on foot, for he had forbidden me to dog his trail farther and I would not be detected——"

"De Vargas? De Vargas came this way?"

Hope sprang to the fire guard's eyes. The shot was for Ramon doubtless; the blood his!

"Even so, Master," replied Juan; "and but a short

time since. He rode to meet the Señorita—and yourself!"

Ricardo stared.

"This merits inquiry, Juan—tell what you know of Don Ramon's purpose on this expedition!"

Faithfully and in detail the Indian recounted what had transpired, beginning with the failure of Claire to keep her tryst with Don Ramon, the note he had taken to her and the message he had carried back to his master. He told of de Vargas' disappointment, his resolve to ride and seek the girl, their arrival at the mission school and the word they received there of Claire's departure on horseback. They had easily followed the trail she made, to the fire station and beyond. At the station Ramon had left Juan on guard, to warn him if Quintana returned; then he had gone on alone, and Juan, fearful of danger, had followed cautiously till he heard the sound of the rifle and Claire's cry, when he made all speed to the spot.

"So de Vargas would have fought with me?" mused Ricardo, having gathered as much from the other's words.

"Perhaps. . . . It was in my mind that a quarrel had already started when I heard the gunshot and the Señorita's scream. Yet what then, since it was not this quarrel, could have moved her to that penetrating utterance?"

Ricardo shook himself free of the gloomy thoughts that burdened him. His eyes shone brighter; his tone became brusque.

"Listen, Juan! It is my thought that I have been caught napping—that Don Tomaso has moved at last. Yet what can it profit him to have taken these two—your master and the girl? And where should he hide them—for I take it that they have been overcome and carried off alive!"

"Assuredly, Señor," agreed the Indian; "for otherwise the bodies would have been left behind. . . . As for where they have gone, their trail will tell!"

He pointed as he spoke to the tracks left in the soft earth by the kidnappers. Quintana nodded.

"You can follow the trail they made?"

Juan signified by an affirmative gesture that this would be but child's play.

"Do so then—your part to track the band warily, learn where Ramon and the Señorita are lodged, then bring me word as swiftly as may be. I go to the cabin of the ranger, Señor Moore, where I shall await news from you."

"It shall be done even as you direct, Master!" said Juan, and turned to his task.

Ricardo watched him vanish among the trees, silent as a wraith. Then the guard walked quickly toward the lookout beyond, where he had left his horse.

Joe Moore, the forest ranger, was poring over one of his fire maps when he heard the sound of rapid hoofs approaching. He raised his head, listening anxiously. There were telephone lines to the stations in the hills, but always a chance existed that a fire might start in some area unobservable from these. Perhaps, he

thought, even now a herald of ill tidings might be here to announce the fact!

He was a tall, lanky youth, bronzed by the sun and hard as tempered steel; a former cowpuncher who had been in the Government service for a few years only. He had a wide, humorous mouth and keen gray eyes; but no humor lay in his eyes at the moment.

When he saw Ricardo enter a frown came on his anxious face.

"What's this, Quintana?" he snapped. "You leave your station unguarded in the middle of the dry season, with the woods like powder?"

"There are lives at stake, Señor!" was the short rejoinder.

Moore stared. The manner of the Mexican had undergone a change; where before he had been docile and seemingly ingenuous he now appeared poised and purposeful, primed with a cool energy.

But this matter could wait—the hazard of a deserted station must be attended to immediately. The ranger picked up the telephone and rang a number, then spoke curtly into the transmitter.

"Pablo? This is Moore talking. Ride over to Hilltop Station and relieve Quintana—at once! Stay there till you hear from me—*sabe?*"

He turned his attention once more to the waiting Ricardo.

"I've sent Gonzalez over to take your place. Now, what's the big idea, hombre; have you quit?"

A faint smile hovered about the dark youth's lips. He replied in English, without a trace of accent:

"On the contrary I'm just starting, Moore!"

The ranger stiffened, a look of amazement on his face.

"What the devil——!"

He broke off as the pseudo-Mexican drew a stiff sheet of parchment from his breast and handed it over.

"Read that while I call up Santa Fé! Time's short."

A moment later he was talking with the Supervisor of the forest. His tone was cool, peremptory. He was giving orders—to the Big Boss!

Moore glanced hastily over the document he held; his eyes opened saucerlike. Astonishing phrases etched themselves on his brain. . . . "Government agent, on a special mission . . . . confidential . . . . forest officers will place themselves under his orders. . . ." It was signed by a high official of the department of justice—countersigned by the Forester himself!

The visitor had ceased talking. He was facing the ranger, a quizzical look in his eyes.

"A little theatrical—my metamorphosis; but I didn't plan this effect—they've called my hand!"

"They?" queried Moore blankly.

"The Penitentes. Tomaso Montoyā in particular. He, as you probably know, is the leading spirit of the band."

"You're fighting the Penitentes—trying to get something on them?"

The youth nodded.

"Something is right. . . . I want to nail the murderers

of Roy Holt—the chap they killed here two years ago last spring."

Comprehension came into the other's eyes. He remembered the tragedy well.

"Of course the society did that job," he said slowly. "But—well, it's getting proof that's hard!"

"I'll get proof," declared his companion confidently. "What's more," he added with the first trace of vehemence he had shown, "before I'm through I'll break up this nest of fanatics for good!"

Moore's expression was one of dubiety.

"Do they suspect yet what you're up to?"

The agent smiled grimly.

"Hardly. . . . I wouldn't be here telling you about it if they did."

He was silent a moment. His gaze became reflective.

"You might as well know some of the details—how I got into the case. Holt was a good friend of mine. In fact, I was the one who interested him first in the subject of the Penitentes—worse luck! . . . I crossed the society's trail in Old Mexico, where I was investigating a matter of gun-running during the last revolution. I got to know a good deal about this order—became pretty thick with the Chief of the whole outfit: but I needn't go into that. . . . When Holt took a notion to write up the organization and its American connections I tried to dissuade him, knowing the danger. But he was obstinate—came up here to Truchas and started investigating things, without my knowledge. Well, you know what happened to him. . . . . I waited a while till the first excitement blew

over, then asked to be put on the case. I could talk the lingo like a native—looked like a Mex, too, with the aid of a little stain and some hair dye. Also I had certain—credentials. I was making good progress, getting the confidence of Montoya, when this de Vargas-Innes affair cropped up. . . . But now——!"

He stopped and shrugged.

"And now?" prompted Moore after a moment.

"Now there are complications. Things have come to a head sooner than I expected. Montoya's got it in for Ramon—he's using the boy's latest infatuation to inflame sentiment in the order against him—hopes, I imagine, to get sentence of death passed against him at the next council meeting. . . . I was prepared for that—but now here's what's just happened—at least as I believe: Ramon and Miss Innes have been surprised together, captured by Montoya and his compadres—Ramon probably wounded, the girl taken off and hidden—heaven knows where. . . . And why Don Tomaso should make this break—unless he's got something up his sleeve I don't know about—beats me!"

Moore had leapt to his feet, his face strained.

"Miss Innes taken—and we're sitting here jawing about it? Why, man, what are you thinking of?"

"Easy, easy!" warned the other. "I told the Supervisor to send out men from Santa Fé at once. They ought to get here tonight or early in the morning—if they ride. We'll call Taggert over from the Rio Puerco and Bailey from Las Animas. In the meantime Juan, Ramon's man, is following the kidnappers. He's to get word to me here——"

He broke off as the telephone rang. He put an ear to the receiver, listening intently. A look of satisfaction came into his face.

"Good work, Juan!" he said. "Wait for me where you are!"

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE PRISONERS

CLAIRE's struggles when she found herself set upon so unexpectedly were of short duration. It is possible that if the numbing consciousness of Ramon's change of heart had not been with her, she would have given up less easily. But an apathy had settled down upon her soul: she now cared little what became of her.

She felt herself being carried through the woods for what seemed a long distance. She wondered dully whether Ramon were with her or whether they had left him where he fell. It mattered little. He was dead to her, above or under ground: that was the bitter fact which she must learn to face, whatever else befell.

She could hear the shuffle and thud of moving feet, the rustling sound of brush being pushed aside. Presently she became aware of faint groans behind her—Ramon still lived! For some reason the knowledge plunged her into a deeper depression than before. Had he died, grief for him might have blunted the sharp edge of self-pity; now the obtruding thought of her abandonment filled all her mind.

The man who carried her stopped; there was a low-voiced interchange of words. She was lifted on a horse, placed in the saddle astride.

"So that you keep your seat and make no outcry, Señorita," came a harsh voice, "there is no need to bind you."

She grasped the saddle-horn with both hands, thrust her feet into the stirrups—it was her own horse, she surmised from the feel of the saddle beneath her. The cloak about her head was unwound and a handkerchief tied across her eyes.

The groans behind her sounded louder. A horse snorted fearfully. The cavalcade moved off in single file.

How long they rode Claire could not say. She decided that she was in the hands of the Penitentes—what dreadful fate was to be hers she did not know. Concerning this she had only the tales she had heard of their dark deeds to guide her—these and the warnings of her friends. But what might happen did not trouble her overmuch. How could she suffer more than she was suffering now?

She was a fool, of course—had always been a fool! Yet it was not her fault, she reflected miserably, that she was endowed with a strength of passionate emotion which overcame her judgment intermittently. She recalled Quintana's words of warning—hated him for being right in his prediction of disaster. But she herself had known the hazard of her course, had even tried to curb her infatuation for de Vargas. The disease had grown in spite of the dicta of reason, of the caution experience had given her. Knowing herself unlucky in that field she had gambled once again for happiness—and lost. . . . Courage, she needed now,

as the fire guard had foreseen; but courage was lamentably lacking. She felt that she could not bear the trial that had come upon her; she longed for death—a lasting peace.

She heard the sound of running water, by which they rode. Then the horses' hoofs struck on rock; they went slowly. A little later they stopped: Claire was lifted from her horse, the bandage removed from her eyes.

For a moment she was blinded by the sun, then as her sight grew stronger she saw that they were in an oval valley shut in by cliffs. Above the cliffs timbered mountains rose sheer. The base of Truchas Mountain formed the north boundary of the vale, for the Peak with the cross on its face loomed high above—almost directly overhead, it seemed.

They had ridden to the upper end of the enclosed area, had dismounted before a rude log cabin which stood there. Riderless horses stood about. At a few paces distant two men whom she recognized as Pedro the one-eyed and a youth named Vincente Baca, a creature of Montoya's, were lowering the unconscious form of de Vargas from the back of a horse to the ground.

Before her stood Don Tomaso, gazing at her sternly.

"The Señorita will be well-advised," he said, "to make no effort at escape. The walls of your cage are adequate."

He waved a hand at the rock walls that shut in the valley on every side. The girl's spirit, supine before, became reanimate at his contemptuous tones.

"You are bold against an unarmed woman," she said bitingly. "Is it permitted to ask the occasion of this outrage? What you plan regarding me?"

His eyes were malevolent.

"You may ask, Señorita—yes. . . . You will be answered tonight when the council meets. In the meantime,"—he indicated the cabin by a gesture—"this shelter is accorded you. But lest you should seek to abuse our lenience, know that one stands on guard to prevent your flight, till you are summoned to the bar of judgment!"

At his brusque command Claire entered the hut, thankful at least that freedom of movement was left her.

There was one room only, she saw, with a window at the side. The door opened on the lower, open end of the valley. Ashes lay on the cold hearth; crude furniture remained from former tenancy.

The girl stood near the center of the room, staring about her. She turned at a sound in the doorway; they were bringing in the body of Ramon. His face was deathly pale, his eyes were closed. A stain of blood on the shirt in front, over the left breast, showed where the bullet had entered.

Pedro and Baca deposited their burden in a corner of the room, on the wooden floor. Montoya, kneeling by the prone form, dressed the wound roughly.

"The ball glanced on a rib," he muttered as he rose; "he will live for the ordeal, *amigos!*"

So saying he left, with Pedro and a fourth man Claire did not know. The youth Vincente, a rifle in

his hand, seated himself on the threshold of the doorway, gazing at the girl impassively.

It occurred to Claire that information might be gained through converse with her young jailer.

"Tell me, Vincente," she said; "why should Montoya trouble himself to lay hands on Ramon and myself ere the council has rendered a verdict in our case?"

Vincente grinned sourly. In times past he had been an unsuccessful suitor for the hand of Dolores; the present situation of his former rival and the Americano gave him much pleasure.

"Don Tomaso is doubtless forehanded," he returned, nothing loath to discuss the diverting subject of the captives' coming torture; "when the nature of the penalties are decided, yourself and de Vargas will be produced forthwith—the affair can be concluded tonight, with no delay intervening."

"But suppose the council should not support Don Tomaso—if we be cleared of the charges made against us?"

Vincente shrugged.

"In that case, Señorita, I fear that you and the youth with you would disappear—never to be seen more."

Claire shuddered involuntarily. She saw clearly now—too clearly, in truth—the mechanism of the plot hatched in Montoya's brain. However the council decided, their deaths would follow one way or another: on this, apparently, the Penitente leader was determined.

She moved to the little window, gazed out unseeingly.

There was deep regret in her heart—not that she must die, but that she must die unloved, with the cold fact that she was wedded standing as a bar between her and Ramon. Why had she not held her peace, she asked herself wretchedly? If she had only known what was to happen to them both! How easy to have preserved in the youth's heart the unsullied image he had known as hers before the revelation of her married state had shattered it!

She stood leaning on the window sill for long, while the sun drifted across the sky, till the shadows on the grass outside the cabin lengthened. She was calmer now, resigned almost; but unutterably lonely. Her life passed slowly before her mind's eye—a short life as years go, but full of error and misfortune. Could she have bettered it, she wondered, had she to live it once again? She did not know. She had been balked throughout by her own nature—yet how could she act other than in accordance with her nature?

One consolatory quality she had always possessed hitherto—courage: but that had failed her in this acid test. Could she not regain it before the end—would not pride aid her? To renounce, to endure, to face the fact of her loss candidly and rise above it! . . . The ashes of courage held embers from which flame started; her spirit reawakened and grew bold. She would face the ordeal of the Penitentes; and the sharper ordeal that had wrung her soul! She would die undefeated by life—by life which she had dared to face equipped only with love and faith!

A sound from behind broke through the spell of self-

absorption that had come upon her. She turned swiftly to see Ramon's wide eyes shining in the dusk.

For a moment she did not move nor speak. The youth's face was devoid of expression. His eyes glittered feverishly, but there was no aversion in them now.

"I have had a dream, Señorita," he said faintly; "wherein my soul was freed from sin by the pangs of an atonement. I would have judged you recently; now I have been shown that one can judge only for oneself—the inner consciousness of sin one's sole guide. . . . You found no sin in what you proposed to me—therefore I judge you no longer. It is in my mind to ask your forgiveness for my thoughts against you!"

Claire's face was calm, but her voice trembled slightly as she answered:

"Were there any need for forgiveness, I would forgive you freely, Ramon—but there is none. We think differently, that is all. Our natures and the manner of our lives have made us different. Your sense of sin is based on a conception of God's will interpreted by men whom you revere; mine by my conception of God as He reveals Himself to me through the dim channels of my soul. So be it. . . . I, too, have had a dream—a pleasant dream while it lasted. I am awakened now—till the shadow of a long night falls and dreams and facts both cease."

He was staring about the room; it seemed as if he had not heard what she said.

"Where are we?" he asked wonderingly.

She told him all that had occurred, and that which

was to occur that night as she interpreted their prospects.

"We shall both, doubtless, suffer an ordeal of atonement!" she ended with a wry smile.

Joy shone in his eyes. A look of exaltation flamed in his white face.

"My dream was a true one," he cried. "Yet I am minded not to wait for the brethren to come hither and drag me forth, as one unwilling to suffer for his soul's sake. Rather would I go to meet the trial of absolution—proclaim my sin abroad ere penance be imposed!"

Before she knew what he was about he had risen from the corner where he lay, was staggering toward the door.

Vincente, who had been watching him with hostile eyes, backed a few feet from the doorway, raising his rifle threateningly.

"Seek not to emerge, de Vargas!" he cried warningly. "I am set to guard you till the moment of your trial comes. A prior exit from your cage will mean death—not salvation!"

But Ramon advanced steadily as if the other's voice had failed to reach his understanding. Claire thought that he must be delirious; so wild were his eyes, so exultant his demeanor.

Vincente ground his teeth vindictively; raised his gun to his shoulder. His finger was crooked about the trigger when the girl, with a shrill cry, sprang forward and threw herself before his victim.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### RECONNAISSANCE

JUAN'S task of trailing the abduction party was thoroughly congenial. He trod the forest floor warily, following with ease the tracks left by his quarry, keeping an eye forward against surprise. The band, he found, had walked a hundred yards or more in a southerly direction, then mounted horses tethered there and ridden eastward into the deeper fastnesses of the woods.

The trail led over ridges and across canyons; traversed the heart of the forest. Not yet did Juan guess their destination. But as the hoofprints bore gradually to the north and led up the canyon of the Gallinas, a small stream heading in the foothills of the Peak, an inkling of Montoya's goal entered the Indian's mind.

Soon the canyon "boxed"; rock walls appeared ahead and on either hand. The way seemed blocked—but it was not blocked, Juan knew. The trail swung to the right and forward by a hidden passage that threaded the seemingly impassable walls of stone. Once through, and the narrow canyon opened out into a cliff-encircled valley—the Hole in the Hills, as it was called. There, Juan surmised, would the captives be sequestered, at least temporarily.

He stopped short on the conclusion, debating whether

to follow further. He had learned what he chiefly sought, the whereabouts of his master and the Americano. To essay the pass meant more than a possibility of detection. Should he not rather make all speed to the ranger's cabin and disclose his findings to Quintana? . . . Yet the impulse to advance was strong. If he could but see Ramon before he left, discover the extent and nature of his suspected injuries—perhaps get speech with him!

His indecision bade fair to cost him dear, for as he stood weighing the matter in his mind the click of an iron shoe sounded from the passage not twenty paces ahead. Low voices were audible—were coming straight toward him!

The trapped spy gazed hastily about, a chill at his vitals. The canyon walls to left and right were smooth and high, impossible to scale. The approaching men were mounted; he was on foot. Short shrift would be his, he was aware, if once they set eyes on him!

He invoked the good offices of the Saints desperately. His eyes roved busily along the blank walls on either hand. . . . *Gracias!* His heart gave a bound. Not ten yards to the rear was a small opening in the face of the cliff—the entrance to a shallow cave. It was the matter of a moment for him to leap back and plunge head first into the tunnel, even as the foremost of the horsemen emerged from the pass.

There were two, the refugee noted, as he listened to the voices of the riders passing. Don Tomaso was speaking now, in his harsh, dry tones:

"It is you, José, whom I must trust to notify the

brethren of our meeting tonight. Pedro will guard the passage; Vincente is stationed with the prisoners. Bear word only to those whose names I have given you—we want no traitors present on this occasion!"

The voice of José Candelario replied:

"It shall be as you order, Don Tomaso. . . . And the password?"

"San Ildefonso!" muttered Montoya.

The voices grew fainter; the hoofbeats died away. Juan crept out, tired and dust-covered; yet his heart was light. The knowledge that he bore would be welcome to Quintana!

There was but a single way out, the trail the two just gone had taken. Juan waited, curbing his impatience, till they had had time to ride beyond the box. . . . But why, he wondered as he waited, should he waste the hour or more it would require to reach Moore's cabin on foot? There was the fire station Quintana had built, on the ridge east of the canyon where he stood. A telephone was installed there for the guard's use. Why not go there and phone the Mexican of his discoveries?

This was the plan he followed. Within a short half hour he was climbing the long ridge that led to Hilltop Station. The cabin at length came into view; to his surprise Juan saw also the form of Pedro Gonzalez, seated before the door and watching the forest languidly.

He must be guarded in his talk, the Indian saw; nor must he indicate by word or manner that anything unusual was in the wind.

He greeted the guard politely, observing:

"A dry season, Pablo!"

"Of the driest," agreed the other. "Yet for three days now has the haze been gathering, Juan. We should have rain soon."

"God grant it!" returned the caller, and requested leave to use the telephone.

Receiving the guard's permission, he called Moore's station and in a few words acquainted Quintana with the fact of his success. At the Mexican's order to await him where he was, he emerged and seated himself on the ground by Pablo, prepared to undergo with what stoicism he possessed the ordeal of the inevitable conversation.

Pablo had hired his eyesight to the Government; his tongue, however, was still his own. During the wait that ensued he indulged himself in talk—Juan thought—intemperately. The process was not without strain, in the circumstances; Juan heard the approaching horses of Quintana and the ranger with much relief. As he rose to greet them he felt as if a penance had been done.

Moore busied himself with instructing Pablo in the details of his new assignment. Quintana, motioning to Juan, led the way to the cabin where he received the Indian's report of his reconnaissance.

When the account was ended he sat silent a moment. It was plain from his expression that Juan's conduct of his mission had been eminently satisfactory.

"This valley you speak of—that the hidden passage leads into," he said presently; "you know it well?"

"Assuredly, Señor!" replied the Indian. "There monthly is held the assembly at which all the faithful gather—entering one by one through the pass which is the single means of ingress. There is the chapel—the *morada*. There are the holy relics—the whips, the chariot of fire, the hide of a minor devil slain by one of the departed Saints!"

His companion's eyes shone.

"Is it indeed the council-place of the band?"

He masked his exultation quickly, for surprise appeared in the Indian's eyes. With his high office in the order, that the possessor of the symbol and the sign should be ignorant of the meeting-place of the brethren was strange!

The chagrined agent endeavored to rectify his slip.

"Think not that I could not have learned this through proper channels, Juan!" he said sternly. "My joy comes from the fact that the prisoners are confined there. At the meeting tonight——"

"Would it not be better, Master," the other broke in anxiously, "to enter now—exert your authority, secure the prisoners' release as speedily as possible?"

This was a poser. What the Indian proposed was the obvious course to pursue, had Ricardo been the illustrious personage he claimed to be. Of course if he had thought for a moment that Montoya contemplated killing Ramon or Claire without the sanction of the council, he would have acted in any event. But he did not think this. He was quite sure the captives would be safe until a verdict was turned in against them at the forthcoming assembly. He was equally

certain that to attempt their rescue now—even were the attempt crowned by success—would result in apprising Montoya of his own bias—would destroy at once and finally what chance he had to wring confession of the killing of his friend Holt from guilty lips. . . . He could not, of course, explain this reasoning to Juan. He must temporize, obviously.

"There is a right way and a wrong way to conduct a matter of importance," he said with dignity. "For the time being the prisoners are well cared for, I make no doubt. When the council meets tonight the question of their prompt release will be raised. Trust me to have the care of their well-being on my conscience, Juan!"

He turned to the table that stood in a corner of the cabin, seizing paper and pencil, writing quickly.

Juan stood awkwardly, with an abashed look.

"I would not have you think I doubt you, Master," he said humbly; "I have seen the sign——"

"Your loyalty is without question," broke in the other, without turning. "Send the Señor Moore hither, if you will!"

When the ranger entered he handed him the note he had been writing.

"A message for Father Felipe," he said; "it must be got to him without delay. Deliver it as you return, then go to your station and wait there for the posse from Santa Fé. Bring them with you to the box in the Gallinas—there is a hidden passage there: a blazed pine twelve paces from the box—a bush against the cliff, behind the bush an opening which leads with-

in. . . . When you're in—well, round them up!"

Moore nodded.

"How many in the posse?"

"With the two men we've called over, and yourself, about fifteen all told."

The ranger grinned.

"And there'll be a hundred of those crazy Indians inside—some party, I'll predict!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE HOLE IN THE HILLS

Moore having left blithely on his errand, his former fire guard and Juan set off on a scouting expedition while light lasted, for the day was waning fast. As they left the station the agent glanced at the high ridge to eastward, beyond which lay the hidden valley.

"You say cliffs surround this refuge?" he inquired.

Juan nodded.

"On all sides, Señor!"

His companion indicated the mountain ahead.

"Could we not climb that ridge yonder and work down the east slope to the rim—from there see into the valley?"

"*Si,* Señor. . . . It would take much effort, however. The hills rise high above the cliffs—they are steep and brush-covered. . . . Yet it may be done!"

"We will do it," declared the other briskly.

They crossed the intervening canyon and stood at the foot of the high ridge. Then began a long, back-breaking climb to the top. A rest here, followed by a descent even more arduous than the upward journey.

The slope as they worked downward grew constantly steeper. It became precipitous: a jumble of loose boulders and fallen trees and brush and creeping vines—impenetrable save to men inured to hardship and rough

going. Here their ropes, taken along at Ricardo's suggestion, came into play. They would lower themselves by a double strand hitched about a tree-trunk, then when footing was found release one end and pull the line after them. It seemed hours, though it was less, before they reached the rim, from which straight walls of stone dropped to the valley floor.

With a sigh of relief, Quintana threw himself prone and peered over the edge of the precipice. The vale, he saw, was perhaps a quarter of a mile in length and two hundred yards at its greatest width. The Penitente *morada,* a hut of adobe without exterior ornament, was visible at the lower end of the bottom. This end was flat and open, with the stream of the Gallinas flowing through its midst. The upper part of the enclosed area, where they had come out upon the rim, was rough with scattered pine and bushes. A little north of them, close to the wall, stood a deserted log cabin which had belonged once to the original owner of the claim—a trapper who had died long since, before the Penitentes had discovered the lost valley and made it theirs by right of occupation.

At sight of the shack and the man seated on its threshold with a rifle across his knees, the watcher drew back hastily.

"Vincente Baca!" he exclaimed. "We have found the prison of our friends, Juan!"

The Indian looked over the edge cautiously.

"It is even so, Señor—Montoya affirmed that Baca would be placed on guard!" He added longingly: "If we could but reach them now!"

At this the other frowned. He could not very well tell Juan the truth—that an object in his coming here was to set the Indian a task which would occupy him till the meeting of the council was well over. To insure the man's absence—since he could not be trusted in that fanatic company—the agent must invent a reason other than the real one, yet plausible, so that suspicion of his good faith might not enter his companion's mind.

"If we could reach them," he repeated slowly, "before Vincente took alarm and shot them both, they would be safe—for how long, Juan?"

"There is the passage below by which we might escape," began Juan eagerly, "with Pedro alone on guard——"

He broke off at a smile and a gesture on the part of his companion.

The sun was low, shadows had crept across the sunken valley. A fire flared up suddenly in the cleared space before the *morada;* by its light figures were visible. Others joined them as the watchers gazed.

"Too late," said Quintana. "The band assembles even now." He rose, preparing to leave. "I must start back, Juan! . . . I shall go in with the others as is my right—fight for our friends' lives in the approaching council!"

Hope lit the Indian's face.

"You will enter the council? Proclaim your rightful rank and station?"

The agent nodded.

"Such is my plan. . . . A penance shall be laid upon the chapter for this day's work. Moreover, the

grip of Montoya must be broken—on that I am determined. I shall call the roll of his misdeeds—bring him to account therefore!"

"And I, Master," cried the other; "may I not be there to see?"

His leader shook his head slowly, with an expression of apparent regret.

"Would you leave the prisoners unwatched, save by Vincente? Your part to remain here, guard against foul play. I fear Baca's treachery, once night falls." He unstrapped the carbine slung across his back and gave it to the Indian. "Here is that which will lend you the strength of ten! . . . But shoot only as a last resort—if the lives of our friends are in danger!"

He was gone, striking a slanting course up the mountainside. Juan watched him till he disappeared, then threw himself full length along the ground, gazing intently at the armed figure below.

His was indeed a coign of vantage for a sharpshooter. It was not much more than a hundred yards to where the guard sat. The Indian amused himself, secure from detection in the gathering dusk, by sighting at the head of the unconscious Vincente. A gentle touch on the trigger and Baca would pass to his reward! The temptation on Juan was strong to test the sureness of his aim. But what gain in that, after all? The report of the gun would bring others running; they would be apprised of hostile presence. A stronger guard would be set—that would be all!

The fire at the lower end of the valley was blazing higher, the crowd about it became larger every mo-

ment. They were silent as yet, but the silence seemed charged with a hidden meaning. In the fire's light Juan made out the figures of two men who strode toward the chapel; they unlocked the door and disappeared within. This would be Montoya, doubtless, and the acolyte who was to assist him in preparing for the coming ceremony. Not long to wait now before the council convened!

But waiting was hard for Juan. He who hitherto had always joined in the rites, to be deprived of the usual privilege on this night of all nights when the life of his master hung in the balance! His heart swelled with the pangs of frustrated zeal. His fancy played raptly with the rôle he might have taken, were things different.

He was left here, he reflected, to see that Vincente did not exceed his instructions and work harm to the prisoners on his own account. But what if Vincente were to be put out of the way without raising an alarm? What if at the same time Juan could find a means of ingress to the valley other than by the customary pass? . . . The thought, which hope envisaged straightway as a possibility, set his pulse pounding with excitement. He leaned far out over the cliff's edge, striving in the gloom to find some sign of possible foothold on its surface.

The drop, he judged, was all of three hundred feet. His two ropes, tied end to end, would not lower him a hundred. Yet he knew that many a cliff whose surface appeared smooth as glass from a little distance, showed upon closer inspection workable irregularities. He could

at least, he told himself, essay the feat—climb back up the rope hand over hand if no place for lodgment appeared during the descent.

It was nearly dark now. The figure of Vincente was a featureless blur. Juan, against the background of trees, must be, he knew, invisible. There was a late moon, but an hour or more of darkness remained before it rose. It was now or never, he realized. He drew a deep breath on the resolve to test his theory forthwith.

He examined the ropes carefully and tied them together with a secure knot. One end of the new line he fastened to a tree that grew near the rim. He slung the carbine on his back, removed his shoes, grasped the rope and let himself gingerly over the edge of the precipice.

For a moment, as he swung there between heaven and earth with the long drop below him, the Indian's courage shook. But the rope was stout; he himself was strong as a young bull. He took heart as he went down slowly, hand over hand, examining the wall as he descended. When he had lowered himself half the length of the line he rested at the knot he had made, looping the loose rope about one leg.

Night was now falling in earnest. In the starlight objects nearby were dimly visible. He could still make out the outlines of the cabin below, but of Vincente he could distinguish nothing. In the lower end of the valley he noted that the Penitentes had formed in a semi-circular body before the fire. Behind a rude altar stood the gaunt figure of Don Tomaso, motionless, with

uplifted hands. The sound of chanting came softly on the wind.

Juan sighed and prepared to resume his slow descent; but as he moved he swung against the wall and felt the grateful pressure of a ledge against his limbs. His heart jumped; he groped for the obstruction with one hand, then got his feet on the narrow shelf. He stood a moment, steadying himself by the rope. The ledge seemed to run downward at a steep angle. Nothing for it but to trust himself to the precarious path!

He drew his knife and cut the rope, coiling the free half about his waist. He let go his hold on the swinging end and moved forward cautiously, step by step.

How long he trod the hazardous trail he did not know. The ledge came to an end finally in a deep fissure in the rocks. A glance downward told Juan that he had progressed more than halfway from the top.

By wedging his rope in the fissure and knotting it about a slab split from the main body of the rock, he found that he could anchor it, as he imagined, safely. He could not see the dangling end; nor could he estimate how far from the ground it hung. Should he, he wondered, trust himself to its doubtful offices?

Best to chance it, he decided, having come this far. With a muttered invocation he dropped off into space. The rope gave slightly, then held firm. Juan slithered downward, his hands burned by the strands that whistled through his fingers. He wrapped his legs about the line and stopped with an effort; then glanced beneath him. He had reached the end of the rope; but fifty feet or more still separated him from the ground!

He hung there wretchedly, owning himself beaten. He must retrace his way up the rope, along the ledge, back to the top by the other line. But could he do it? He was tired now; his hands were raw and bleeding. Was it not better to let go and drop—trust to chance and his own tough frame to carry him through uninjured?

As he swung, undecided, the sudden shrill cry of a woman rent the air. The voice of Vincente sounded, sharp and menacing. At the same moment Juan felt the treacherous rope give suddenly. He felt himself hurtling through space. A crash that shook every bone in his body—then nothingness!

He could not have remained unconscious long, for when he recovered his senses the voices he had heard still sounded in his ears. He stretched his limbs gingerly; he was sound though bruised—a scrub oak by the cliff had broken the full force of his fall. He gave quick thanks to the Saints for this their timely aid.

He glanced toward the cabin, whence the voices sounded. Vincente was backing away from the door, his rifle at the ready. Within the hut Juan descried Ramon advancing slowly and waveringly. He was overjoyed to set eyes on his master; the wound could not be serious, he thought, since de Vargas walked thus, so soon. Yet why did he walk toward Vincente, who plainly threatened him?

Ramon's eyes were wide and fixed; he seemed to be moving in a dream. The voice of the Americano sounded, wild, fearful. She was pleading with Ramon to stop, warning him of Vincente!

Juan crept steadily closer. They had not heard him as yet, did not dream that he was near. He longed for his carbine but it was useless, broken by his fall. In his teeth, though, was his long knife. He crawled forward on hands and knees.

Now Vincente was on the point of firing—he raised the gun, his eyes dropped to the line of the sights. Ramon had reached the doorway.

"A step more," cried Baca, "and you die!"

Juan was five yards distant from the Penitente. He rose to his feet silently, grasping his long knife. His arm drew back, then shot forward; the knife clove the air. Even as the Señorita rushed forward and threw herself before Ramon the keen point of the flying missile entered Vincente's back between the shoulders.

The guard's gun slipped from his hands; he fell forward on his face without a sound and lay still, half-buried by the grass.

## CHAPTER XX

### ONE COMES FROM AFAR

THE face of Father Felipe grew thoughtful as he read the note Moore gave him—the note in which Quintana had set forth the day's developments. The priest and the agent must be allied, Moore surmised, against Montoya and his faction—though how that odd alliance had come about the ranger could not guess.

If the association did exist, however, Father Felipe gave no hint of it as he folded the paper he had perused. His features retained their usual calm, his eyes were absent in expression as if he weighed a matter in his mind.

"I cannot say the news you bring is welcome," he said at length; "yet to be forewarned is much. My thanks for the prompt delivery of the message, Señor!"

Moore, on the point of speaking, hesitated. There was much he wished to ask the other; but somehow the moment seemed unpropitious. He said merely:

"No answer was mentioned. In any case I will not see our friend before the meeting tonight."

The priest's smile was grim.

"No answer is required—save the answer action makes to the necessity set forth in the communication."

The ranger left. On his way home he stopped at the mission school, having determined to apprise Isabel of Claire's predicament before she could learn the facts from other and perhaps less friendly lips.

To his surprise she did not seem greatly disturbed by his tidings. Her forebodings seemed to have discounted the facts effectually.

"I feared disaster," she said with serious eyes; "now that which I feared has come. . . . If only Claire had listened to our warnings!"

Moore's gaze was kind. For some reason Isabel always roused in him the protective instinct of the male. She seemed to him curiously innocent of reality, in certain aspects; she was a good girl, he would have said, according to her lights.

"Some folks won't take advice, Miss Isabel," he commented; "they've got to work things out for themselves—learn what's what in this life by hard knocks. . . . I reckon after this Miss Innes will think twice before she gets mixed up with a Mex——"

He stopped abruptly, his face flushing a dull red through its tan. He had forgotten for the moment that the girl before him was of the same race as Ramon.

Her expression did not alter, but a sombre look came into her eyes at his thoughtless speech.

"It is that Claire overlooked the circumstances of her position—and of Ramon's. His blood, I think, should be no bar to their happiness, were that all."

"I reckon you're right," agreed the ranger impulsively. "Anyhow, I'll say this much: I never ran across a girl I liked as much as you—if you *ain't* Ameri-

can! . . . You and me are friends, aren't we, Miss Isabel?"

Her eyes fell before his frankly admiring gaze. She murmured:

"I am honored, Señor! . . . But Claire—can nothing be done to help her?"

He hesitated, then said slowly:

"I wouldn't worry overly much about her, if I were you. She's got friends who are doing what they can for her. She's safe till after the meeting tonight, I reckon. And then——"

He paused, loath to reveal even to her the preparations they had made to trap the Penitentes—the coming of the rangers from Santa Fé. It was well for his plans that caution controlled him, for Dolores, passing the door of the room, had heard and recognized his voice and stopped just out of sight, listening intently.

She heard Isabel sigh and say despondently:

"My hopes are small, Señor, for Claire's safety. The society of the brethren is all-powerful in Truchas. Her fate, I fear, is linked now with Ramon's—and he, alas, is doomed! . . . If only she had not allowed her passion for Ramon to overcome her judgment!"

Moore's face had a dubious look.

"You think she's as strong as all that for de Vargas?"

Isabel nodded.

"At first I did not think so, but now . . . . only yesterday, Señor, she pledged her word to Father Felipe that she would avoid Ramon for a time. Today in his company, you say, she was surprised by Don Tomaso

and his companions. . . . What can one think but that she loves him?"

The ranger looked thoughtful.

"Maybe you're right— Now I think of it, Juan claimed they were having words—just before Montoya jumped them. And according to Juan it was Ramon who was making the row—Miss Innes was trying to pacify him. . . . But that's not the main question now——"

He broke off, staring suspiciously at the door which had creaked suddenly. He rose and reached it in three strides: the hall was empty!

He returned to his chair with a sheepish look.

"Thought I heard something out yonder," he said; "but I must have been mistaken."

Had he glanced behind the door, which opened outward, he would have found that his ears had not deceived him. Flat against the wall, Dolores stood behind the door, motionless till the interrupted conversation in the room had been resumed.

As the voices sounded once more she slipped from her hiding-place and vanished down the corridor. Catching up her shawl she stole from the house by the rear door and hurried home, seeking her father.

She had known that Montoya intended to take Ramon and the Americano together; to hide them till the verdict of the council had been given—against them, as he hoped. In that case they would be where he could produce them instantly, make sure that whatever penalty might be ordained was carried out on the spot, while the minds of the brethren were still inflamed.

If, unexpectedly, a decision should be given in their favor—well, they would still be in Don Tomaso's power!

That Dolores had learned of the compact made by Claire and the priest was responsible for Montoya's hasty move, by opening his eyes to the fact that his intrigue was known. Hence the prompt kidnapping of De Vargas and the girl, the calling of the council for that night; hence also the careful selection of those bidden to attend. The single feature of the program changed in execution was the shooting of Ramon instead of his capture unharmed, as had been planned.

Montoya had fired on impulse, when he saw his hated foe helpless through the sights; but as it turned out he could not see but that this way was as good as another to advance his general purpose. It had the merit of avoiding what might otherwise have proved a hard and sanguinary struggle; the youth was not mortally wounded—would survive in any event till the trial had been held. On the whole Don Tomaso felt well pleased with the way events were moving.

He had returned from the hold where he had left the prisoners and was resting in his study, planning in his mind the details of the night's projected coup, when his daughter entered.

"Our work is known, Father!" she announced breathlessly. "Juan, the servant of de Vargas, has followed your trail—even to the valley of the councils!"

Montoya's brow grew black.

"What ill-omened news is this?" he demanded thickly.

Briefly she repeated the gist of what she had overheard. Luckily for him, Moore had named no names but Juan's of those not already implicated, told nothing but that the captives' whereabouts had been discovered and that it was known the meeting of the order was to be held that night instead of later. Yet this was enough, and more than enough, for Montoya.

He leapt from his seat, strode raging up and down the room.

"Doubtless the prying Indian has by now borne word of the gathering of the society to the priest," he snarled. "The ranger knows also of our plans. But—how many more?"

The quick wits of Dolores had been busy.

"Had he told all in Truchas inimical to us, Father," she observed calmly; "what would they gain thereby?"

The Penitente stared.

"Time works for us," she went on; "no opposition that you need fear can be organized before the meeting tonight. It is obvious, from what the ranger said, that they have no idea of trying to free the prisoners before then. They deem them safe, for the time being——"

"A thought lies there!" broke in her father darkly. "Why should I not visit the prisoners even yet—make sure of our vengeance——"

"It is to avoid that very thing—your sole responsibility for their destruction—that we have been working; would you spoil all now? . . . No! Go before the council as planned; get the support of the order for

what you design! Then can you rest assured of safety in the outcome."

"And if the priest appears in the assembly—pleads for the lives of the condemned?"

"That risk you must be prepared to take. If the priest—or other enemies—appear, you must welcome them: they will by that very fact be unmasked! . . . It lies with you whether, once there, they may depart as easily!"

Montoya stopped pacing suddenly. His stare grew fixed. As the argument of the girl registered in his mind, he nodded with slow satisfaction.

"There is pith in your words, my daughter! At the council I shall know at last who are for and who against me. Let the strongest win!"

He paused, frowning reflectively. Suddenly at a thought his lip curled with contempt.

"I had forgotten—a minor point, but interesting. . . . The woman would have fled with de Vargas, as his mistress. He repulsed her—she was already wedded, she confessed. Who would have said even that remnant of piety remained to him!"

Dolores started sharply at his words. Her eyes darkened and became fathomless. Her lips scarce moved as she whispered:

"Married? The Americano married? . . . And Ramon repulsed her!"

Montoya did not observe the girl's sudden change of mood. He was preparing to leave: the light guard he had left at the valley was the cause of a growing anxiety.

He muttered hastily:

"De Vargas would cast her off, doubtless—as he did you. . . . We took them together in good time!"

He moved to the door.

"Wish me good fortune, daughter!"

She answered nothing. . . . She sat on immovable, while the dusk drew slowly down, while night fell and stars appeared. Hours passed. Tumult was within her, for all that she seemed cold and still. Something she had once called love, but which she thought had died, was fighting to regain a lodgment in her heart. She tried to crush it—told herself that revenge was sweeter than that struggling emotion which fought on so fiercely. . . . Her father's words rang in her brain: the woman was married—Ramon had repulsed her! . . . Dolores bowed her head in her hands, murmuring scraps of prayer for the first time in days—since her love had died. . . . But was it dead? Tears crept between the fingers of her clasped hands. Her shoulders heaved slowly; sobs came. Love had been dead, but was now resurrected. . . .

A loud knock at the outer door roused her. She rose quickly, brushed a hand over her eyes and answered the peremptory summons. On the doorsill stood a stalwart man in the prime of life, ill-clad but with a haughty mien and dark, imperious eyes.

"Don Tomaso Montoya?" he demanded curtly.

Something in his face, in his burning eyes, impressed Dolores strangely.

"My father is absent from home," she began; then shrank back at a swift sign the stranger made. She

bent low, awe in her eyes. "Enter, Master!" she said reverently.

The other shook his head.

"I have travelled far to see Montoya. My errand is urgent. I must know his whereabouts without the least delay."

The girl hesitated for a breath, then said quickly:

"A moment, Eminence! I go to fetch horses for the trip. I myself will guide you to my father!"

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE COUNCIL

By devious routes the brethren of the cross came to the hidden valley, afoot, for the most part, silent as lovers stealing to a secret rendezvous. One by one like shadows of the night they flitted up Gallinas Canyon and disappeared behind the clump of bushes that masked the way into the Penitente stronghold.

Among them moved the man known as Ricardo Quintana. He reached the screen of brush, entered the narrow tunnel through the cliff on the heels of the cloaked member before him. It was pitch dark here; he went slowly, keeping his course by a hand on the smooth wall at his side. He emerged at length, whispered the password, "San Ildefonso!" to Pedro at the tunnel's mouth, then with a sigh of relief at his successful entry mingled quickly with the throng inside.

The *morada* stood at his right hand, on rising ground fifty yards or more from the stream which bisected the valley. Across the stream on a flat-topped knoll was a row of wooden crosses facing the chapel. Perhaps ten yards from the latter, before a rude altar, raised for the occasion, flared the fire which Juan and his companion had seen from the rim above. It was larger now; men were feeding it from a huge pile of piñon and juniper wood heaped at one side.

For the most part the brethren were grouped between the fire and the creek bed. No one spoke: it was the custom that no greeting could be passed, no recognition of another granted between the hour of setting out for the assembly and the holding of the Penitente Mass.

The sham Quintana, lurking in the background well out of the direct play of firelight, felt reason to be grateful for this inviolable rule of taciturnity. That he was an intruder he knew well. How short his term would be were his deception to become known to the grim fanatics surrounding him, he suspected with a disturbing sense of certainty. The fact that Montoya had not included him in the list of those summoned to the council might mean much or little. It might mean merely that the other had not been able to get word to him of the hastily called assembly. If on the other hand the Penitente leader had penetrated his disguise he was done for—had walked into a trap. Time only, he reflected philosophically, would tell which of these alternatives was in accord with fact.

He was aware of a sudden movement in the crowd. A hoarse voice within the dark *morada* raised a mournful chant. The brethren lent their voices to the strain; the cliffs sent back a weird response.

From the doorway of the chapel stepped Montoya, clad in black robes, holding before him in one hand a crucifix and in the other a skull. Behind him walked the acolyte carrying a tall, lighted candle and a Penitente whip.

The assistant placed the candle on the altar, the skull

and cross likewise; then stepped aside, the whip still in his hands. Montoya stood motionless, his face stern and impassive.

His arms went out suddenly; the chant died. His harsh voice rose in the immemorial phrases of the service.

The ritual, Quintana noted, was essentially grotesque, a travesty on that of the true Church; yet its setting was impressive. As the sonorous phrases rang out with the deep antiphonal murmur of the crowd for a booming counterpoint, despite himself the agent felt something of the excitement that animated the gathering. A sense of unseen presences was his; he felt the influence of superstitious hopes and fears. Faith in the vagrant yearnings of the untutored soul seemed wise and logical. He shook himself impatiently to rid his mind of the cloud that settled down upon it like a warm mist.

The Mass at length was done. The ranks of the brethren were charged with strong emotion; they were ripe for orgy. It was the moment for which Montoya waited. His the privilege to direct for good or evil the force called into being.

He paused, gathering in careful hands the reins of eloquence. As he stood thus, marshalling his thoughts, above the eastern ridge the moon slipped into sight. A wan radiance flooded the valley, contending mildly but with a slow insistence against the red flare of the fire. Dim forms of men were silvered, streams of light filtered through obstructing trees and formed pools upon the valley's floor. To northward the dark

bulk of Truchas Peak leaped from obscurity and stood bathed in a white glamour, the cross on its face hanging, as it were miraculously, in midair.

A subdued murmur ran through the throng. With one accord heads turned toward the symbol—their talisman for comfort and protection while the stone Peak endured!

Montoya, quick to bend the omen to his purpose, cried loudly:

"A portent, brethren! The holy emblem of our order is revealed to us at a fitting moment, to confirm and sanctify the judgment we are gathered here to render!"

The murmur of the crowd took on volume, deepened to a roar. Eyes centered on Montoya who stood with arms outstretched, judging the temper of his followers. They had, he saw, caught the underlying meaning of his words. Rumor of late had been busy; it was known that charges would be brought against de Vargas in the council. Don Tomaso and his henchmen had sown their seed well; the minds of the brethren were prepared.

Their passions likewise were now dangerously roused. The time to act had come.

Silence fell at the Chief's peremptory gesture.

"The cross has blessed our band—we have prospered! Yet only as we accept the lesson of the cross, observe the rules laid down by the founders of our order, may we hope for a continuance of protection!"

He paused, to resume instantly in a stern tone:

"None of us is free from sin—that we admit freely and combat by proper penance. Where the offense is

flagrant it is the part of our council to judge the act and assign to the transgressor the ordeal for its expiation. . . . Thus often in times past—thus recently in the case of our brother, José Candelario!"

His glance rested for a moment on the youth mentioned, who was prominent in the front rank of the crowd.

"Did the penalty ordained bring fruit of repentance, José?" he asked sombrely.

"*Aie!* Of a truth!" asseverated the self-conscious youth. "Much peace has my soul gained thereby!"

"Inevitably," commented Montoya. He glanced piercingly about, his brows knitting in a frown. "Yet when the sinner is not a member of our order—where lies our duty then?"

This was a direct reference to de Vargas—and accepted as such. Conflicting cries arose, diverse views were voiced.

Candelario spoke out clearly:

"All men are kin—linked in one company by the sad consequences of misdoing. It ill-behooves us, guardians of truth, to grudge salvation to an erring brother—though he be not of our band!"

"That is my view also," said Montoya quickly. He added: "It is of Don Ramon de Vargas I speak, a youth formerly of good repute though lacking, it may be, in proper piety. Of late, as you know, he has fallen into ways of lust and wickedness. I need not recapitulate the facts—they are of common knowledge. That an intrigue so open and audacious should thrive in our midst is inconceivable; yet is it so. Shall it be

permitted to continue—shall the affront to our code be longer countenanced? Must a lost soul be charged to our account by reason of our negligence? Or shall we assume the duty that is plainly ours to discipline this erring brother—reclaim him for the high community of holiness?"

A roar greeted the hoarse crescendo of his peroration. Hands waved, eyes gleamed wildly in the moonlight. Voices shrilled out above the general noise.

"The offense is great—let the penance be adequate!"

"Save the soul of Don Ramon, even in his own despite!"

"Let judgment on the libertine be passed!"

Satisfaction showed in Montoya's face. He had not misjudged his influence over the minds of his followers.

"There is no question but that we should recognize the strong obligation that rests upon us in this instance. The youth, though blinded to the benefits of our society, is one whom we have known since boyhood—a son of Truchas truly. We cannot, surely, stand idly by and see him sunk in mortal sin. We must lend a helping hand to snatch him from the pit. It remains only to determine the nature of the atonement he must make——"

He ceased suddenly, his eyes narrowing. From the crowd emerged one who stepped into the open space between the people and the altar, who stood a moment with bent head as if in prayer.

Quintana, on the point of intervening, relaxed thank-

fully. He had counted throughout on the aid of Father Felipe: the priest had not disappointed him.

"What do you do here, Padre?" cried Montoya wrathfully.

The old man raised his head, fixed grave eyes on the leader of the Penitentes.

"My errand is soon told—I would save you and your minions from the sin of blasphemy. . . . Is it permitted one who wishes only well for you all to say a word in this matter before judgment has been made irrevocable?"

Montoya hesitated. Had he dared he would have refused the priest's plea; but he did not dare. Father Felipe's hold on all in Truchas was strong; already the curiosity of the crowd was caught. They would learn why the priest had taken this unheard-of step—come uninvited into the council whose meetings he had held aloof from hitherto, whose judgments he had more than once condemned.

"I know not," said Don Tomaso, "how you who have long been an avowed enemy of our order should have gained entrance here tonight. Since you have, however, speak out, Father!"

The priest turned to the crowd, his eyes earnest.

"I take the charges against de Vargas as amply proven," he began, "for well I know that not by hearsay alone would you condemn one whom you have hitherto regarded as a friend and patron."

Montoya broke in roughly:

"The facts are undeniable. I myself attest their truth."

The other bowed with an ironic smile.

"So be it. I ask no more than that Don Tomaso vouch for the youth's sin. This being granted, what atonement for so heinous a thing but death? What lesser penance can wipe away the stain of this extreme transgression?"

Montoya's eyes opened in surprise. Whither led this unexpected trail?

"It is the penalty I myself would urge," he admitted. "The youth has sinned knowingly, with open eyes; his partner a gringo woman—a wife, brethren, by her own confession! No sign of or leaning to repentance on the part of either! A gross scandal that all in Truchas know of—the example outstanding and vicious in its probable effects!"

The priest's eyes flashed, his voice rang out indignantly.

"You would kill the youth then?"

"Aye! Him and his partner in the crime—together. The manner of their death, in my view, is all that need concern us now."

"Have you no concern then," cried Father Felipe scornfully, "for the effect of such a deed upon the good name of the order—upon the prestige of Holy Church within whose bosom you have been nourished? Suppose de Vargas and the woman slain—with all justification if you will—think you the Penitentes can escape the indictment of encompassing their death? Will not the friends of the condemned move in the matter? Will not the law of the Americano have its say? Does

not the obvious danger to the society and to the Church concern you?"

Montoya smiled disdainfully. His eyes flickered about over the throng.

"The priest," he said with a contemptuous shrug, "is fearful of fancied consequences. He is unfamiliar, it is apparent, with the methods of our order. He knows nothing of the secrecy with which we work, of the vows of silence we have sworn. How can he, who is not a member of our dread fraternity——"

"Yet one is present," broke in the other surprisingly, "who is all that I am not—yet who will warn you even as do I of the peril of your course!"

He pointed with outstretched arm. Through the crowd pushed a broad-shouldered man who ranged himself beside the priest. In silence Ricardo Quintana turned and faced the throng.

## CHAPTER XXII

### CHECKMATE

THERE was a moment's hush—a hush of amazement. Many of those present knew the man who faced them as Ricardo Quintana, but to Montoya only had he revealed the fact of his membership in the order of the Penitentes. How, the others wondered, had he won an entry to the valley, to appear spectacularly before them vouched for by the priest?

He seemed thoroughly at ease, his face with its white scar calm and uneager, his eyes glinting in the firelight as they ranged over the assembly. But though his courage held, he was not without apprehension. He realized that the crux of his desperate undertaking was at hand, that the next few minutes would decide whether he or Montoya would prove victor in the high stakes they played for.

It is true that Father Felipe held a trump card in reserve—the sentence of excommunication; but this the priest was loath to use save in direst extremity. It had been agreed between the two that on Quintana would rest the task of convincing the brethren of his authority, did the priest's first effort fail.

Quintana broke silence abruptly, speaking, not as usual in a husky whisper but in a clear, carrying tone:

"I come, brothers, from the parent chapter in Mex-

ico; far have I travelled that I might be with you on this occasion. Yet, though upon my arrival I showed credentials of membership to Don Tomaso, I was not notified of the place and hour of this meeting; I was not invited to attend, as courtesy would dictate, as my fraternal right would urge!"

He turned swiftly on the Penitente leader.

"Is there a reason hid from us, Señor, to explain the seeming incivility?"

Rage had succeeded wonderment on the face of Montoya. He had indeed by design omitted the intruder's name from the number of those summoned to the council. It was not that he had thought the man actually dangerous; he had held for him hitherto a secret contempt—a feeling not lessened by Ricardo's stupid failure in the matter of the ambushing of de Vargas. It was rather that he had decided in the circumstances to limit the assembly to those known to him to be of proven loyalty and discretion.

Now he wished fervently that he had put the snake out of the way while it was still feasible. The whole character of the other had altered: he was cool and purposeful, confident and poised. Montoya himself had been the dupe—deceived by an enemy whose astuteness he had fatuously underestimated!

The knowledge maddened the Penitente, but caution quickly prevailed.

"The credentials appeared genuine," he muttered; "yet who knows? Much care must be exercised in the admission of strangers to our ranks. I have sent letters by a trusty hand to the Head in Mexico re-

garding the matter—word should be forthcoming soon. . . . . In the meantime, let us not forget that we have assembled not to foster dissension but to render judgment in the affair you know of——"

Quintana broke in resolutely:

"It is of that matter I would speak." He paused. When he resumed it was with a new air of authority: "Experience has taught us of the parent branch that wisdom lies in disciplining those only who have taken vows of obedience to the order. The arm of the law is long; to come into conflict with it is to jeopardize the interests of the society. There is the Church also to be considered. Father Felipe is right. To kill de Vargas lies not within our jurisdiction. To kill the young Americano would be madness——"

"Have done!" cried Montoya furiously. "How it is in Mexico I know not, but here—" He caught himself and paused uncertainly; then yielded to the impulse of his rage: "Here the order makes its own laws, renders its own judgments. It has been so in times past—it will be so while the great Cross of Truchas endures!"

A gleam of eagerness showed in the eyes of the pretended Mexican.

"But are you so daring where those of American blood are involved, such as the Señorita Innes, for example? Or do you act thus fearlessly only when the condemned are of the lesser Spanish strain?"

At the bold taunt a growl went through the listeners. Montoya's face flushed darkly.

"Had our brother been with us two seasons since

he would have known of the destruction of a gringo—a youth whose boast it was that he would probe the secrets of our society!"

Quintana smiled sardonically.

"I have heard rumors of the incident. . . . So you would claim credit for the killing of the youth?"

His insolent skepticism at another time might have roused Montoya's suspicions, but the Penitente's passion obscured his better judgment. His face was distorted, beads of sweat stood on his brow.

"This arm struck the knave down!" he cried, beside himself. "Vincente Baca drove the knife to his heart! Those who joined in the disposal of the corpse stand here tonight, witnesses to the truth of my words!"

He stopped, chilled by the sudden knowledge of what his admission meant—by the curious intent look of the man opposing him. But the wild acclaim of his followers heartened him. With the chapter on his side, he knew, his enemies were impotent. And those enemies, he promised himself grimly, would, before the meeting adjourned, be silenced effectually.

But what was this look of triumph on the face of the Mexican? Whence came the consciousness of power that marked his features, the resonance that filled his voice as he turned to the clamorous throng and stilled their shouting with a gesture?

Montoya saw the gesture as it was repeated; his knees failed him, the roots of his hair stirred. His eyes grew wide with fear as the stranger drew from his breast and held on high a crucifix of white stone that gleamed red as the firelight fell upon it.

"To your knees!" cried the dark youth in stentorian tones.

The brethren, with a sigh that rustled through the throng like wind through dry reeds, abased themselves one and all. Montoya sank to his knees. Only Father Felipe, crossing himself sombrely, remained upright beside the holder of the symbol.

The latter spoke, in a slow, solemn tone that drove each word home:

"You do well, friends, to render homage to this holy token of our order, the badge and emblem of my office. . . . Yes, I whom you know as Ricardo Quintana am no less a personage than the Supreme Head of the Penitentes. For weeks have I dwelt among you in the humble guise of a stranger, striving to learn the truth of the reports that reached me in Mexico as to the conduct of the Truchas chapter—rumors of decadence, of a spineless acceptance of the will of your leader, Montoya, of crimes committed in the name of the society to further the interests of a single man, whose arrogance has at last overreached itself."

A moan went through the prostrate ranks. Muttered supplications could be heard, prayers for forbearance.

"As to the internal conduct of your affairs," went on the youth, "that might be forgiven. But deeds such as the killing of the stranger, Holt—which Montoya has just confessed; such crimes, reacting on the good name of the order throughout the land, are difficult to overlook!"

"Pardon, Eminence," muttered Don Tomaso; "but the man would have spied out the secrets of the chapter——"

"And were those secrets harder to preserve unrevealed than the loud fact of the youth's murder?"

The fickle crowd growled ominously, casting on their trembling leader looks of enmity.

"Don Tomaso, of a truth, instigated the act!"

"It is his hatred of Don Ramon which moves him in the present matter!"

"Tell us, Master, how best to repair our former errors!"

The Mexican waited for the cries to cease. then said:

"The policy laid down is strictness of discipline within the body of the order—lenience without. We cannot fight the law and the Government. We cannot contend on equal terms with the Church. We must recognize the hostility such acts as those we have discussed create against our society. . . . Here, in the Truchas chapter, you have been badly led. The chapter must be purged; a penance will be imposed—but of that later. Now we must decide on the handling of the case before the council—the case of Don Ramon and the Americano, Señorita Innes."

At once loud voices rose advocating mercy. Let the woman run her evil course, it was no concern of the brethren! Let the youth persist even to satiation in his perverse infatuation—God would doubtless deal with him in His own time! Let not the welfare of the society be jeopardized—that above all!

Quintana raised a hand for silence. When the tumult died he bent a stern glance on Montoya and said accusingly:

"The youth and the maiden shall be cleared, but what shall be done with this false leader who puts his own desires above the welfare of the order he is sworn to cherish? Nay, you know not all the depth of his guile: appealing to you for judgment on the twain, he has seen fit before judgment was rendered to attack them without warning, wound Don Ramon grievously, take both captive and hide them—where, think you, brethren?"

As he paused for his effect, casting a glance over the scowling ranks before him, he was seen to start suddenly and start back a step. His face, flushed with triumph, paled. A look of consternation flashed in his eyes, to be succeeded instantly by a gleam of caution, by a forced smile.

Unseen of any, two figures had crept warily from the rocky pass at the outlet of the gorge, pausing at the outskirts of the throng where they stood a moment listening to the words of Quintana. Then they had worked unostentatiously forward.

At the moment the orator's eye fell upon them, the taller of the two was in the act of stepping forward from the crowd into the cleared space before the altar.

Gaining his objective, he stopped, facing the dismayed youth. He stretched forth a lean, arresting arm. His voice shook with wrath as he cried:

"Seize the impostor!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE MADNESS OF RAMON

THE appearance of the irate stranger at the moment when Quintana's triumph seemed assured struck the latter as an undeserved misfortune. Thus far, he flattered himself, he had played his cards with skill and intrepidity, but he was under no illusions concerning the precariousness of his hold on the mob before him. They had swung his way for the moment, impressed by the talisman he bore and the surprise of his claim to eminence in the hierarchy of the order. They would renounce that hasty allegiance, he knew, as quickly as they had assumed it—were reasons given them.

It was a question now of whose word they would take—his own or his accuser's. Much would depend on how he met the charge levelled against him. With a vigorous effort, therefore, he strove to regain his aplomb.

"Words avail nothing," he declared boldly, "lacking the sustaining strength of fact. Will any here deny the efficacy of the symbol that I bear?"

The stranger made no spoken reply, but threw back the serape from his features in plain view of the crowd. The red light of the fire brought out the stern lines

of that forbidding visage; Quintana stared at the man's face with a sinking heart. Well he remembered the hawk-like nose, the lean and cruel jaw, the hard imperious eyes. It needed not the joyful exclamation of Montoya, the awed murmur from the watching throng to tell the young agent that his house of cards had fallen. The face he gazed on was the face of Emilio de Gama, right hand to the High Preceptor and a personage familiar to the members of every chapter in the order.

That he was known to the brethren of Truchas was made manifest by the shout that went up from a hundred throats.

"De Gama! De Gama! It is he assuredly!"

The representative of the Head did not unbend as the clamor rolled and beat about him. His face was expressionless, his eyes remained fixed intently on the youth before him.

"Seize that man!" he ordered for the second time.

Fury took the exposed masquerader. He saw death in the eyes blazing into his—well, he would not die alone! His hand slipped to his breast, closed about the gun nestling in its shoulder holster. At the same moment Montoya seized him from the rear, pinioning his arms. Men dashed from the crowd and threw themselves upon him. In a trice he was overcome; disarmed and tied hand and foot.

De Gama had stepped quickly forward and snatched the emblem of white stone from the other's grasp. He kissed it reverently in the sight of all; then held it on high, facing the Peak to northward.

"Long shall this night be noteworthy!" he cried. "In the shadow of the cross has the sacred symbol been redeemed! The protection of the Most High still rests upon us, and upon our holy order!"

His eyes moved sidewise to Father Felipe, who had watched events in silence, with thoughtful eyes.

De Gama said softly:

"Will you not now acknowledge, Father, the validity of our claim to order this affair as seems good to us? Is it not an omen that success crowns our struggle against hostile influences? Will you not join us in the forthcoming ceremonies—bless our evening's work?"

The priest frowned. De Gama's voice held a veiled threat which he was not slow to catch. Had he consulted his impulse at the moment, he would have cursed rather than blessed the other's murderous activities; but this, in the present temper of the gathering, he knew would be madness. Even sentence of excommunication, his last weapon, would be futile against the armor of zeal they had assumed with the appearance of the Mexican.

He must bide his time, he decided; hope for a later opportunity to intervene with better chances of persuasion or coercion.

"Little power have I to stay your hand, de Gama," he said sombrely; "had I the will. Yet," he added, pointing to the sky, "God watches yonder! Have a care how ye tempt His avenging wrath!"

An ironic smile touched the thin lips of the Penitente. Then with a sudden frown he turned to his

prisoner, who lay glaring at him from the ground. He spurned the sham Quintana with his foot.

"What shall be done with this dog, brothers?" he cried loudly. "This renegade, this vile blasphemer?"

"Death to the carrion!" shouted one.

"Let him feel the whip!"

"Torture would not come amiss!"

The emissary from the Head gazed grimly on the throng.

"First I would tell you somewhat of his crime!" He paused, flicking the bound youth with a look of hate. "He is known to me—oh, yes, he is well known to me! Not three years since he joined our order, for his own ends; rose rapidly in the parent chapter, won the confidence of our former Chief—now gone to his reward in heaven. . . . Little need to detail here the intrigue by which this one involved the society in affairs properly belonging to the realm of politics, nor the difficulty with which we of the opposing faction preserved the existence of the society in direst straits. Suffice to say that with the death of the old Head and the election of the new the dog's double-dealing was disclosed at last. He was discredited, condemned to death. He escaped, taking in revenge the sacred symbol which he has borne since despite our efforts to recover it and to destroy the thief. Not till we received the recent letter of Don Tomaso giving a description of the man calling himself Quintana, did we dream of this one's whereabouts. But with the coming of Montoya's message, we recognized the malefactor at once. I came hither forthwith, making what speed

I might. . . . God be thanked, brethren, that I have come in time!"

The assembly gasped at this revelation of iniquity. A shout arose for the blood of the transgressor. His crime was signal—let him escape no longer the death he merited!

The subject of the discussion strained at his bonds, his face bitter. He was helpless, trussed like a fowl; bursting with humiliation and chagrin. He surmised that Father Felipe, with the best will in the world, could do nothing further to aid him. Moore and his rangers would not arrive before daybreak at the soonest. But by that time, the captive fully believed, he would be food for crows. Hope left him; he was checkmated!

Under cover of the uproar Montoya had approached de Gama; was speaking to him urgently. His arm moved in the direction of the cabin where Claire and Ramon had been placed. A new pang assailed the watching Ricardo. His life, he recalled, was not alone endangered by the failure of his plans; Miss Innes also was in deadly peril. None save himself knew the rigor of the anguish that thought produced.

The envoy from Mexico was commanding silence.

"Brethren!" he cried when he could make his voice heard above the babel; "there is news for your ears! With commendable prevision Don Tomaso has taken prisoner de Vargas and his accomplice in sin—even now they lie under guard at the hut in the valley above! Let them be brought straightway before the bar of judgment!"

"José Candelario," directed Montoya, "Diego Mendoza—Eduardo Luna! Bring hither the prisoners!"

The three chosen for the task started from the crowd, but stopped in their tracks ere they were well away.

From the night emerged two figures that halted at the edge of the zone touched by firelight. A mutter of amazement came from the throng—it was the giant Juan with his young master leaning against his shoulder!

Ramon, summoning his strength, straightened and stood forth alone. His face was pale and proud; no sign of weakness or of fear marked his features.

"You need not send for me, friends," he said in a firm tone; "I am come of my own will to suffer penance for my sin!"

There was a moment's hush; no one moved or spoke. On Montoya's face lay a curiously baffled look, as if hate had somehow been cheated of its due.

De Gama, his eyes narrowing, whispered to Father Felipe:

"See now, Padre, the compelling power of our order to draw sinners to its bosom!"

The priest did not even hear him. He was staring at Ramon incredulously. Anxiety was in his deep-set eyes; lines about the tight lips betrayed pain.

The youth was speaking once more, laboriously as if the effort wearied him:

"I confess my sin—proclaim it abroad! Yet not the sin with which I have been charged, the sin of dalliance with the Señorita Innes. I speak of a more

subtle evil—the sin of profane desire, the sin of black disloyalty to love!"

His words rang strangely in the ears of his astonished audience. But his eyes were on Montoya, who scowled back wrathfully.

"I loved the Señorita Dolores," went on the youth; "for years—since we were children together. Recently I asked the maiden's hand of Don Tomaso, who refused the boon for reasons that seemed good to him."

"Well that I did," broke in the gaunt Penitente; "since your depravity has revealed itself to all!"

"Depravity? Yes—of a truth; yet I know not even now how the matter came about! It was a madness that came on me—the influence of the Evil One, perhaps. I was wroth that my union with Dolores should be barred. I deemed her love faint that she would not defy you, Montoya, and the customs of our race. Now I see that it was my own love which could not stand the test—which was overborne by vanity and wounded pride. . . . Then the Señorita Innes came, a solace for my disappointment. I thought her fair—I was beside myself, bewitched! I forgot Dolores and my love, my pledged honor! It was today only, when the Americano revealed the fact that she was already a wife, that the scales fell from my eyes. I saw then clearly the enormity of my actions, the base treachery that was mine. Now I confess my sin, repent of it. I would make fitting atonement and receive absolution ere my soul flies to God!"

Father Felipe broke the ensuing silence. His voice

was hoarse with emotion, his arms were outstretched pleadingly.

"Ramon—Ramon! It is the office of the Church to receive this confession you would make—the office of her priest only to impose penance and grant absolution! Will you forsake the Church now in your extremity? Will you deny her primacy in matters spiritual?"

The youth shook his head slowly.

"The Church will not now meet my need, Father! What! shall I mumble Aves, fast perchance for a brief time—and be healed of the sore that festers at my heart? How will such mild penance compare with the bitter anguish I have brought upon Dolores? No, in my case the crueler code of the brethren of the cross is alone adequate. I would feel the whip searing my flesh, the iron in my soul. I would suffer the extreme agony of crucifixion, as the Master did! Then, and not till then, will I know peace."

De Gama was eyeing the priest exultantly. He wished no open quarrel with the Church or any of its ministers, if it could be avoided. Therefore Ramon's unexpected stand relieved him greatly; the torture of a willing convert was more easily justified to the affiliated power than the killing of a non-communicant. Moreover it tied the priest's hands; his quarrel now —so far as the case of Ramon went—was with the youth not the Penitentes.

He turned to de Vargas; cried loudly:

"Your need shall be met, brother! None call upon the brethren of the cross in vain!"

Ramon swayed with the words, his strength ebbing. Juan sprang to support him, but ere he reached his side a slender, cloaked Penitente darted from the crowd and placed an arm about the youth's waist. The face of Dolores, aglow with love, appeared before his eyes; her whisper sounded in his ear:

"I will save you, Ramon—even from the madness that your wound has brought upon you! You have sinned against none—except it be myself, and I forgive you freely. I will save you, Ramon!"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### CLAIRE MAKES A DISCOVERY

Of all the witnesses to Ramon's sudden appearance among his enemies none, it is safe to say, was more dumfounded than the youth known as Ricardo Quintana; nor was his wonder lessened by the sight of Juan—whom but a few hours since he had left on the cliff high above the valley. How in the world, he asked himself incredulously, had the Indian succeeded in reaching his master? What had happened to the guard, Vincente Baca? Above all, where had they left Claire?

Concern for her whereabouts, it appeared, was not his only; for Montoya had whispered to de Gama. who in turn addressed the two new arrivals:

"You were guarded, I am told—you two and a third. How then did you elude the warder—where is the Americano?"

Juan answered promptly.

"Vincente would have fired on my master: he is dead, slain by my hand. As for the Señorita—I do not know; she came not hither with us, as you see."

The brows of the interlocutor drew together menacingly. He called to the three men selected by Montoya to bring in the captives:

"Find me this woman—she cannot have strayed far!"

His gaze returned to the Indian, who had so casually confessed the killing of the guard.

"Bind the man Juan! Lay him beside the other—the blasphemer!"

Juan drew back a step, his teeth showing in a snarl, his long knife gleaming in his hand. Those who had pressed forward recoiled more quickly still. Few there were who desired a hand-to-hand conflict with the giant Indian!

Montoya raised the weapon he had taken from Ricardo: but Ramon, gazing about swiftly, spoke to his servant in a quiet tone. Juan's face puckered, yet he thrust his knife beneath his clothes and held forth huge arms docilely.

"Bind me then," he muttered; "since my master wills it!"

A moment later he was stretched beside Quintana, tied hand and foot. Above them Father Felipe stood motionless, his keen eyes on de Gama.

The Mexican's regard was fixed on Ramon, who stood leaning heavily on the slim Penitente beside him. The wounded youth's face was drawn with pain; he seemed to retain consciousness only by an effort of the will.

De Gama spoke resonantly:

"De Vargas was hurt when captured—by a mischance. Lest he sink under the early phases of his ordeal, his be the first flesh to feel the lash! What say you, brothers—a stroke from each present? There-

after the honor of a crucifixion, as the condemned desires?"

A shout of acclamation sounded. Willing hands seized Ramon, stripped the shirt from his back. The blood-soaked bandage about his breast was tightened. They led him across the little stream to one of the crosses erected opposite; tied his wrists firmly to the crossbar, his face inward, his bare back exposed. Then they formed in a long line to pass the cross; set up their wailing chant.

The acolyte proffered the heavy whip he held to de Gama, who took it absently and strode forward toward the cross, followed by Montoya. But suddenly he stopped at a thought, called men from the forefront of the line.

"It is not meet," he said, "that hostile eyes observe the approaching ceremony. It is permitted that the priest remain; but place the two whose fate remains to be decided within the *morada* yonder! When the gringo woman be found, let her be bound and laid beside them, to await our pleasure!"

He moved on again, swinging the leather-thonged whip, to where the motionless form on the cross awaited the torture to be meted out. . . . What the Mexican would have thought had he known that from the doorway of the *morada* the Americano his men sought was at that minute peering out, watching his slow progress with fearful eyes, it is hard to say.

Claire was shaking as with a chill; she felt dazed by the unexpected impact of events. Since the killing of Vincente it seemed to her that she had been exist-

ing in a nightmare, followed by unseen pursuers, gazing on scenes that bore the lurid hallmark of the pit. She was free now from the cabin where she had been held —but not from the dark valley. How long she would be able to remain hidden from the Penitente searchers she could not tell; nor, at the moment, did she greatly care. The cumulative experiences she had undergone weighed on her mind like lead; she was stunned, numb with the burden of remembered horror.

The worst had been when she had seen Ramon's open eyes fixed upon her in the cabin, heard his amazing declaration of apostasy. Vaguely she recalled his rising and walking to the door of the hut, where Vincente, his gun aimed and ready, stood waiting for him grimly. That was when she had rushed forward, struggled to prevent the madman from setting foot across the threshold. Weak from his wound, he had staggered and fallen backward as she closed with him. She had risen quickly, turned to plead with Vincente. . . . . The guard was lying on his face, motionless, the handle of a knife upright between his shoulders!

She recalled her shock at the sight, her start of fear at the sound of a voice close at hand. She had looked up to see Juan, cut and bruised, his clothes torn and stained by earth, stumbling toward her from the direction of the cliff.

"My master, is he badly hurt?" were the Indian's first words.

They turned together to Ramon, who was stretched senseless on the floor of the cabin. Juan lifted him with ease and bore him to the pile of saddle-blankets

in the corner where he had been couched previously. Claire repeated Montoya's words: that the ball had glanced on a rib—was not necessarily dangerous. Not if he received proper care, she added to herself—but if he were tortured by the brethren?

A quick thought came: with Juan's aid might she not restrain de Vargas, if on recovering he should persist in his resolve to surrender to the band? The Indian had succeeded in entering the valley, by some method as yet unexplained; was there no chance that they—all three—might yet escape the fate reserved for them? With this hope dominant she told Juan all that had taken place, including Ramon's intention to yield himself to the Penitentes—his wish to expiate what he conceived of as his sin.

To her surprise Juan did not see eye to eye with her as to the folly of this course; she had forgotten that he himself was a Penitente.

"Don Ramon has judged well," he declared with gloomy conviction. "Did Montoya force my master to undergo the torture against his will, Juan would fight for him to the death; but since he would suffer penance of his own volition I will not cross him, Señorita."

"But he is wounded—to suffer the ordeal now will kill him surely!"

Juan's face was stubborn.

"Even so, Señorita; is the loss of life a matter to deplore when salvation weighs against it?"

The girl gave in then, despair at her heart. She watched by Ramon's side till he should recover con-

sciousness, hoping that this time his eyes might open on a saner world than his sick brain had seen before. Her thoughts had left her own unhappy case, to center on the youth and the dire fact of his aberration. If she had ever felt real love for him it was now, when passion had been burned away leaving a deep pity in its place, an affection for him that was more like the feeling of a mother for her child than the emotion of a woman for her lover.

Hours passed. The moon rose and stole across the sky. Claire sat on, immovable. Shouts and the confused milling of many men about the fire below betokened that preparations for the forthcoming ceremony were under way. Momently Claire looked for a summons from her captors.

Now she regretted having told Juan of Ramon's decision. They were unguarded, nothing prevented their issuing from the place of their confinement—hiding as best they could from the eyes of the Penitentes, who would be cheated of their prey thus for a time at least. But the Indian, when she broached the project, flatly refused to budge. He would wait till his master came to, learn his will from his lips.

Claire could have left them, fled alone; but this she was loath to do. She dreaded the dim valley shut in by its inaccessible cliff ramparts; moreover she could not bring herself to forsake Ramon, for all that her presence did him no least service. The truth was that she had not entirely relinquished hope of his regaining reason with his next awakening; he might

even, she told herself, be able to suggest some better scheme of action than she herself had hit upon.

He opened his eyes at length, stared vacantly up at the two bending over him.

"I have come, master," muttered the Indian; "to do thy will!"

Comprehension came into the youth's eyes. He rose weakly, aided by his servant. Claire's heart sank as she saw in his eyes the same fanatic light that they had closed upon.

"I would seek atonement, Juan," he gasped, ignoring the girl utterly. "Aid me to reach the council fire, where the brethren gather!"

They set off with slow steps, Claire following aimlessly. She had done what she could to prevent the result she dreaded; it had been of no avail. Despair entered her heart; it seemed to her that this appalling march marked the end of everything that she held dear and perdurable. Why should she herself strive to combat the fate that loomed for her?

Her half-formed purpose was to surrender with the others; but when they drew near the fire with the yelling fiends about it, the girl's courage failed her. To postpone the awful moment of submission to their will seemed to her the one stark necessity of her being. She stopped involuntarily as the others moved slowly forward.

She saw Ramon and Juan gain the circle of firelight, halt as the wondering stare of the crowd met them. She saw the tall figure of de Gama, whom she did not recognize; by his side Montoya. In the back-

ground stood Father Felipe, and near him, bound and lying on the ground, was Quintana who had promised to aid her if he could.

Evidently his endeavors, like her own, had ended in ignominious failure; yet the mere sight of him, alive, served somehow to stimulate her waning courage. He could not see her, she was sure, but his expression was anything but hopeless. He would fight on, his angry eyes and set jaw seemed to say, despite the desperate nature of his present situation. Could she be less courageous?

The feeling of natural affinity, of some obscure tie between them which she had felt at times in the past, came over her now with added force by reason of their isolation among enemies. He could not help her, that was plain; but could she not help him? At the worst she still had liberty of movement: was there not some coign of vantage from which she could watch what transpired without being in turn spied upon?

She glanced about quickly. The dark chapel on the knoll to her left caught her eye. Its walls threw shadows; looking from out the firelight it must lie in impenetrable obscurity. Moreover, that was the last place a search party would judge her to have entered as a refuge.

Cautiously she drew back and circled wide to the left, coming up to the chapel from the rear. She gained the doorway without misadventure and slipping inside, crouched there with a deep breath of relief.

At the moment de Gama was issuing some com-

mand; what it was she surmised from the fact that men lifted the prone forms of Quintana and Juan, who was now bound also, and began carrying them—straight toward her hiding-place!

Her heart rose in her throat; she could not risk leaving the chapel now. With no clear plan in mind she rose and fled to the rear of the room where a long closet stood—the cache where the paraphernalia of the order was stored.

Quickly she stepped within, closed the door to a crack. She watched the Penitentes lay their double burden on the floor, then hasten back whence they had come, loath to miss aught of the ceremony under way.

Claire breathed again, hope stirring faintly within her. That she should be opportunely here to release Quintana, assure him that at least one person—though a woman—was working with him to frustrate their common foes, seemed to her a miracle of good fortune.

Softly and with infinite caution she opened the door of the closet and moved toward the dim forms of the captives. She was within a yard of them when Quintana groaned and turned over, struggling with his bonds. His face lay in a shaft of moonlight that pierced a narrow window to the left.

Claire never knew why she stopped suddenly, caught in a strange medley of emotions. It did not seem to her that it was the Mexican fire guard who lay there, but another. The conviction she had felt faintly before now—that this was someone she had known in days long past—came upon her with overwhelming

force. Memory struggled to break through the shell of years into her numbed consciousness. Who was he —who that she had known aforetime?

The moonlight on the youth's face gave it an unaccustomed paleness. The disfiguring scar was hardly visible; the twisted smile that she had thought must be in part its product was wholly missing. The sleepy eyes were wide, with a new expression in their depths; the whole face had a different expression—as if a disguise had been abruptly thrown aside.

She bent over, looked closer. The straight black hair had been pushed up at one side, revealing a telltale streak of white along the brow—the gleam of yellow hair above! . . . It came to the girl in a flash that the man had been disguised—that she had penetrated his disguise. . . . She knew him!

She dropped to her knees beside him, whispered with a sharp and exigent excitement:

"Richard! Richard Warren! Is it you—or am I dreaming!"

## CHAPTER XXV

### A LOOPHOLE OF ESCAPE

For a long moment Claire gazed spellbound on the man before her. As she gazed, with more and more of certainty she knew him for the man who had deserted her years since, when she had been a girl innocently ardent, captured by his pretense of devotion. He had left her, she recalled in a spasm of remembered misery, vowing eternal fealty—for five long years he had vouchsafed to her no sign of his existence!

Had their meeting taken place at some other time, in other circumstances, the sudden knowledge of his identity would doubtless have roused her to indignant anger merely—wrath grounded in contempt: at least pride would have allowed no different reaction to emerge. But now, with death imminent for both, her pride was in abeyance. She had, she realized, no enmity toward him. And curiously, as Ricardo Quintana the youth had rewon her trust that he had lost as Richard Warren; the impression she had gained of him in his latest rôle lingered, despite the thought of earlier recreancy.

With a strange clarity of vision she gazed on the frank features that the moonlight showed. There seemed no place there for duplicity; no trace of weak-

ness or of cowardice was apparent. Could she, she wondered, have been misled as to the fact of his abandonment—had there been some hideous mistake? She had been deceived in so much by her father, why not in this also? At the thought her face lighted; hope whispered pleasurably to her heart; and she realized with a quick throb of emotion that underneath her pride she had never ceased to love him.

Her brief passion for Ramon had left her suddenly. She knew it now for what it was: a fever of the senses only, called into being by the insubordinate desires of youth. And as she knelt staring at this other, probing the recesses of her heart, she knew also that despite every obstacle reason could advance she still set Richard Warren on a pinnacle alone. Her old love, her first and last love, revivified and singing in her veins, was an experience, she realized, of deep and lasting significance. Even with his earlier offense unexplained, she felt that to die with Dick—if die they must—would be a sweeter fate for her than to live on without him.

When she had called his name, dropped beside him so that her face came into the moonlight, he gazed up at her in silence, his eyes wide as if he looked upon an apparition. A strained expression grew gradually in his face.

"You know me at last?" he murmured; "yet your eyes are kind! Is it pity that moves you to regret my present case?"

She leaned closer. Her voice was scarcely audible.

"Not pity, Dick!"

A light leapt into his face at the soft tones, at the meaning that charged her eyes.

"Can it be," he whispered tensely, "that they lied to me, when they returned my letters—told me that you had repented of your short infatuation, wished to see me no more?"

Hope turned to joy in the girl's breast—to a glory of unconquerable happiness. It seemed to her that all her life she had been walking blindfold, in a nightmare of unreal grief, toward this glad moment of awakening. It was so, what she had surmised! He had been true, her heart sang; he had been faithful!

There was no time now for explanations, she knew, yet she said with swift vehemence:

"There has been a terrible misunderstanding—I see it now! They did lie to you—and to me: I thought you had deserted me. Yet beneath everything I think that I have always held you first. Now, at least, I love you, Dick—and I shall love you to the end!"

He drew a deep breath. His face was as the face of one who looks, after vicissitudes, clear-eyed upon his heart's desire.

"The irony of fate," he murmured with a faint smile, "that we should clear our path of hindrance at the moment when it promises to end—forever!"

His words brought Claire back to the present ruthlessly. She realized, with a sharp qualm, the insufficient tenure of their lives.

"Is there no hope then?" she asked, half to herself.

Warren's face grew grim; his jaw set resolutely.

"Hope enough—and the strength of new desire. We

live. You here, miraculously, to release me! There must be a way——"

"There is a way," came a sombre voice from the shadows by the doorway; "a way which I shall reveal to you—so that you two aid me in a plan I have in mind!"

Claire turned quickly toward the sound; the bound youth glanced anxiously into the obscurity. Like a shadow Dolores glided from darkness and stood above them.

"I would save Ramon," she went on swiftly; "for since he broke from the spell of the Señorita—who it appears has found prompt consolation for his defection—I have hopes that our love will move along propitious ways. But first he must be rescued from the hands of the dark brethren."

Her voice was low and even-toned but her face, Claire noted, was drawn and marked by suffering, her eyes gleamed with a fever. She waved an abhorrent hand toward the door, through which was visible the long line of the Penitentes winding past the cross where Ramon hung. As each one of the file reached the spot he caught the whip from the hand of the predecessor and brought the lash down bitingly upon the red-striped back of the unconscious victim. A mournful chant issued from the lips of the fanatics as the rite progressed.

Claire shuddered and could not repress an exclamation of horror. Dolores' eyes rested briefly on the other, then turned questioningly to Warren.

"What will you do?" asked the youth eagerly.

"This, first!" replied Montoya's daughter, as she bent and cut the cords that bound him.

He rose with some difficulty, stamping softly, flexing the muscles of his arms. Then before Claire fathomed his purpose he caught her to him and kissed her.

"Our time may be short," he murmured; "yet if we do not escape I shall have the memory of this to take beyond the grave!"

"Have done!" snapped Dolores. "Place and time enough for love-making when our work is finished."

She had turned to Juan and was preparing to free him also, when the Indian broke his silence.

"Loose me not, Señorita—if to be freed is to aid you against my master's welfare!"

The girl straightened and stared frowning, surprise in her face.

"What mean you, fool?"

Claire would have explained Juan's attitude as she had learned it, but the Indian was first.

"Don Ramon has chosen to atone. It is for his soul's sake he suffers—the gates of heaven open wide before him. Why, then, should we hinder the process under way?"

Dolores straightened slowly, replaced the knife in its sheath.

"Another mind unhinged," she commented shortly. "I had counted on this one—but no matter. We will do without him."

She left him without more ado and moved quickly to the rear of the room, motioning to Claire and her

companion to follow. Fumbling against the wall by the fireplace, she pressed suddenly on a hidden spring; the slab that formed the hearth rose slowly till it rested against the chimney behind. A black hole with steps yawned where the slab had been.

"Here," said the girl, "is a way out of the valley. Few know of its existence. I myself learned the secret through a chance indiscretion of Don Tomaso, my father."

Exultation came into Warren's face.

"Why," he cried, starting forward, "we are saved!"

"And Ramon?" queried Dolores.

The youth stopped, gazed at her with strange eyes as if debating a matter in his mind. At his look she smiled faintly and pressed the unseen mechanism in the wall; the slab slid into place once more, a bar between them and the outer world. At the same time the girl drew a revolver from beneath her cloak, with an effect of casualness.

"It is to enlist your aid in rescuing Ramon, Señor, that I have shown you the sole avenue to safety which exists. Have patience, therefore, till the first venture be completed!"

His heart sank promptly. To snatch de Vargas from the midst of the fanatics outside seemed to him an undertaking bordering on the fantastic. Yet to attempt it, at least, was the one way of impelling the determined girl who faced him to unlock the stone door of the passage underground.

"You plan a sortie?" he asked incredulously. "Two

women and a man to fight a hundred crazed fanatics? It is madness!"

"I had hoped for Juan's aid," she returned imperturbably; "but he has failed me. There remains you and myself, Señor—for the Señorita Innes must remain here; she would but hinder us!"

"And you dream of success?"

She nodded with complete conviction.

"I shall save Ramon, Señor—make no doubt of that. . . . Listen! None of the brethren is armed—and the advantage of surprise is ours. Thus have I planned: we will go to the right when we emerge, keeping in the shadows, circle and join the line at its extremity—the last two, therefore, to wield the whip. I came hither with de Gama, cloaked as you see; no one has so far recognized me. You shall don a cape from the closet yonder, where the store of the Penitentes lies; in the uncertain light it will be almost sure that we reach the cross where Ramon hangs undetected."

"Yes—but what then? Is it not better to rest here—let Ramon risk the remainder of the ordeal? If fighting come, here we can make a stand. They may even bring de Vargas here, once the whipping is over——"

"Once the whipping is over, Señor, and they will nail Ramon to the cross—it is what my father has determined. That, with his wounds and suffering, would be the end—were we not here to succor him! . . . . When we have reached the cross you will quickly cut the ropes that bind him now, and lift him to your

shoulders. It is the part I had reserved for Juan—but you are strong. There will be few between us and the *morada*—it is a short run only and the light, as I have said, is not of the best. If any attempt to intervene I have my pistol. Once we regain the shelter of these walls, once the door is shut and barred against pursuers—and we are safe, Señor!"

Warren stared at her, his face a study. His admiration for her was high; for himself he would take the desperate chance her scheme afforded—but there was Claire!

He turned to her, but she was speaking as he faced her.

"Go—Dick! And God's hand guide you!"

"Give me the knife, Señorita!" he said to Dolores. "The plan has, as you say, its virtues!"

The flames of the fire had fallen now, it was a mass of glowing embers. The line of chanting brethren was silhouetted against the darker cliffs behind them. The moon sailed the sky overhead, smaller and whiter than before. The cross on the tall Peak to northward maintained its vigil, serene, inviolate in its white majesty.

Warren followed Dolores to the doorway, watched her as she glanced this way and that ere she stepped from the shelter of the *morada*. But why did she hesitate, peer anxiously toward the north? What was that dark wedge which loomed at the sky's margin, advancing with the speed of thought across the mild face of the heavens? Light flamed and flickered over it; the rumble of far thunder sounded, grimly menac-

ing. A sighing in the trees that clothed the mountains rose to a dismal wailing, then to a louder, fiercer note that dulled the swinging cadence of the Penitente chant.

A puff of cold wind struck the watchers; the lightning flared out vividly. The dry season was broken! The first storm from the north was driving down amain!

Dolores drew back abruptly, faced her allies with illumined features.

"The Saints are with us! A moment only, and the blanket of the storm itself will hide our sally. Ah, the good God is merciful that He thus aids our plan!"

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE RESCUE

THERE was a roaring in the trees that drowned out all other sounds save the recurrent thunder. The wind was a gale that swept the valley floor like a great broom. Dust and sticks filled the air. The black cloud from the north raced across the sky, ever larger and ever more portentous.

The watchers in the doorway of the *morada* saw the long line of Penitentes falter, the hand of him who at the moment held the whip checked in midair. The heads of all were turned in the direction of the approaching storm: well did the brethren know the violence of nature when the dry season breaks.

Montoya was speaking quickly to de Gama, his mouth close to the Mexican's ear. He waved a hand toward the *morada;* was suggesting, evidently, that they seek shelter there till the worst of the storm passed. Dolores whispered warningly to her companions; but de Gama refused the shelter indicated. He was seen to shake his head and gesture peremptorily to the file across the stream, as if to urge them to complete the rite of flagellation.

The black cloud had engulfed half the sky. It

slid forward rapidly toward the moon, whose pale rays still touched the valley softly. The cloud gulped the moon at a mouthful; a weird darkness fell. The dying fire alone lit the scene; its red gleam shone on the two Penitente chiefs, on the kneeling form of Father Felipe, on the cross where the hapless de Vargas hung, pinioned by the arms.

Dolores peered forth eagerly.

"Now, Señor!" she said, and slipped from the doorway.

Warren, with a last glance and a wave of the hand to Claire, followed her. Instantly they were swallowed by the darkness.

The girl they had left stood without moving, straining her eyes in the gloom. In a momentary hush between thunderclaps she was aware of a sound close by, the sound of a man struggling fiercely—Juan fighting against the ropes that bound him! She would have investigated further, but just then a flash of lightning came: she made out an addition to the line of Penitentes. Thus far, she surmised, the strategy of the rescuers had been successful.

Those of the brethren who had already dealt the single blow permitted were gathered in a semi-circle below the cross, carrying the burden of the chant and waiting with what patience they possessed for the end of the long ordeal—an ordeal now for them as well as for their victim. At the moment Claire's eyes fell on this group she saw them bow their heads and wrap their cloaks about themselves more closely. At the same time a blank opaqueness dropped like a cur-

tain between her and the world, blotting out all things: the rain was come.

It was less rain, in truth, than a watery torrent —an emptying of the vast cisterns of the sky. The floor of the valley was flooded, a sudden lake; the stream of the Gallinas foamed and rose quickly, overflowing its banks. The rattle of the thunder seemed to dwindle in the hiss and spatter of the downpour. A cloudburst! thought the girl fearfully.

Soon the opaque mist thinned somewhat, the rain slackened and came more steadily. Thunder was directly overhead, crash upon crash. The lightning was constant, a fierce jointed flame that flickered and stabbed the sodden earth vindictively. The gods of the black void rode abroad; the trampling of their war steeds shook the world, the flash of their bright spears was blinding.

The red embers of the fire had sputtered and died out at the first onset of the rain, but the lightning lent a fitful vividness to the new scene. Claire saw the priest still praying on his knees, unmoved amid the turmoil; she saw Montoya and his companion upright like statues on the knoll beside the blackened fire. There were the huddled brethren beyond the stream, below the cross.

She drew a quick breath of excitement—the last two of the Penitente line had reached the cross. The crisis of their undertaking was at hand.

The first and smaller of the two sham flagellants—Dolores as Claire suspected—cast down the blood-stained whip as it was yielded to her and turned

abruptly on the body of the waiting brethren, her gun threatening them. Her companion was slashing at the cords that bound Ramon's wrists to the cross-bar . . . . the limp form sagged—was flung quickly across the broad shoulders of Warren. Leaning against the hurricane the rescuers swung round as one and plunged into the waters of the swollen stream that barred their path to safety.

There was blackness for a moment, but in the next lightning flash Dolores and Warren, the latter with his dripping burden still on his back, showed clear and sharp on the hither bank of the stream.

Claire sighed with relief; she had feared for them in the rushing torrent that they had been forced to breast. Her relief merged into dismay as she saw de Gama grasp Montoya's arm and point with his free hand at the double apparition. Montoya nodded and jerked from beneath his serape the automatic he had salvaged from Quintana—which fact the youth had overlooked, to his present cost.

Dolores, noting her father's move, stepped in front of her companion as if to shield Ramon. Her gun was levelled even as Don Tomaso brought his weapon into line; but ere they fired the fluttering illumination of the lightning failed them.

Montoya and the envoy were placed between the rescuers and the *morada*. Claire prayed earnestly that the darkness might hold till her friends had passed the point of greatest danger. But as she voiced the wish unconsciously, she heard the muttered words:

"You would deliver the body of my master, Señorita. . . . . I go to save his soul!"

She whirled as the lightning glared. A dark bulk shot by her; she saw Juan, shreds of rope clinging to wrists and ankles, leaping toward the oncoming rescue party.

She screamed a warning, but the thunder drowned her cry. It drowned also the bellowing voice of Juan. Montoya, aware from the faces of Warren and Dolores that a new element had come into the conflict, cast a swift glance behind him and started sharply. Ignorant of the Indian's real intentions, he could not be blamed for judging that the bounding figure was hostile to himself rather than a potential ally. With a snarl of rage he raised his gun and fired point blank at the man's breast.

Juan dropped in his tracks and lay still, a martyr to the superstition which had driven him. At the same instant Warren, seeing his chance, laid the body of Ramon on the ground at his feet and sprang forward across the space that separated him from Montoya. Ere the Penitente could turn to face him the agent smote him with his whole strength behind the ear; Montoya fell as if struck by a sledge.

The youth snatched the gun from the other's hand and turned upon de Gama.

"To the stream!" he said tensely. "Do not delay on your life!"

De Gama hesitated, but briefly. There was that in his foe's menacing eyes that lent wings to his feet. Without a word he turned and scuttled ignominiously

down the slope, away from the *morada.* Warren, at his heels, paused by Dolores and took up once more the lax body of Ramon.

"The way is open, Señorita," he panted. "A moment more, and we are safe!"

But the brethren across the stream, stupefied at first by the daring of the rescuers, had rallied and were surging across the stream, up the slope. They met de Gama, carried him with them in their rush to overhaul the two who would cheat them of their prey. Dolores was walking slowly, as if exhausted. Warren, with the dead weight of Ramon to support, labored beside her, unable to lend her the aid she plainly needed.

The speeding Penitentes were overtaking them, would come up with them, Claire saw, before they reached the shelter of the *morada.* Impulsivly she ran forward, put an arm about Dolores, and helped the swaying girl toward the doorway. She did not see Warren's anxious frown, the glance he cast behind judging the prospects of escape.

Claire supported her fainting charge till they had gained the refuge they sought. The girl's face was deathly pale, her eyes heavy and dull. She dragged her feet arduously as if walking in a dream. Her friend's eyes widened apprehensively as she perceived a stain of blood on the left shoulder of Montoya's daughter. She was wounded; Don Tomaso had fired in the darkness—with better aim than he had thought!

Claire would have laid the girl on the floor of the *morada,* but Dolores objected.

"To the passage!" she muttered, her features

strained with the resolution that kept her from collapse.

They gained the fireplace. Dolores' hand groped along the wall; with a last effort she pressed the hidden spring. The slab that formed the hearth rose slowly, even as the girl slumped down at her companion's feet.

Claire stared with beating heart at the gulf opening before her—the path to safety! . . . But where was Richard—and Ramon?

She glanced hastily back, through the entrance door of the chapel; by the flickering lightning was revealed that which congealed the warm blood in her veins. Five yards from the entrance the first of the Penitentes had come up with the young agent and were surrounding him. He had laid down the body of Ramon and stood astride it, prepared to sell his life as dearly as he could, now that the end had come.

As the girl gazed, horror in her eyes, the ranks of the enemy were reinforced by dark forms which sprang forward momently. Knives gleamed in swarthy hands —the order's ruling against weapons at the council had been honored in the breach, it seemed.

Claire groaned in bitterness of spirit. At the very last, so close to escape, that they should thus be frustrated!

They were closing in now on her lover—hers for so brief a time. . . . On the outskirts de Gama, his eyes ablaze with hate, urged on the brethren with hand and voice. A moment, thought the girl, and it would be over. The dream that she had waited for so long

to realize, that she had hoped would last, threatened to dissolve before her eyes in a red mist of blood.

She could not bear it; she would not! She sobbed wildly, with wrath as much as with anguish, and turning, ran swiftly to where Dolores had fallen prone. She snatched the gun from the unconscious girl's hand and sallied forth to die beside the youth she loved.

Her glance was on de Gama—he must be dealt with first, she had decided. She raised the pistol, sighted along the barrel—then stopped uncertainly, for the savage face she saw above the sights had frozen suddenly to a blank look of wonder. The man was staring northward, pointing with a shaking arm.

Beyond him Claire was aware of Father Felipe, who hitherto had not left his knees, starting upright and stretching his long arms toward the heavens, as if in gratitude at the quick answer to a prayer. The Penitentes, too, had whirled and stood as if abruptly spellbound.

Above the rumbling thunder rose an awesome cry:

"The cross! The cross!"

Claire's eyes swung northward with the rest—northward where stood the giant Peak with the great cross carven on its face. The summit of the Peak was wreathed in swirling clouds, but by the fire of heavenly artillery could be seen for a breath the stone symbol set of old for a protection over the souls within its wide-flung shadow. For a breath only; then in the dazed girl's sight the whole face of the mountain seemed to fall away, to crumble and disappear. . . .

The cross was gone—had vanished from the sight of men forever!

In the momentary hush of consternation the voice of the priest shrilled out:

"Beware, Penitentes! Beware the hand of God! Thus do the idols of the wicked fall and shatter into dust!"

As if to punctuate the thought a terrifying crash sounded; untold thousands of tons of dislodged rock fell on the slope below the cliff, rolled in a roaring avalanche down the mountainside—straight for the doomed valley where they stood.

The rumble of the approaching slide shocked the ear, a cosmic turmoil beside which the loud noise of the thunder was as nothing. A vast cloud of dust arose, a wind came whistling, the strong earth shook beneath their feet. Stones flew through the air, huge boulders bounded down the valley like hail.

The slide neared—death neared with quickly increasing speed. In the confusion Claire felt a sudden iron grasp on her arm. She turned to see Warren at her side, the body of Ramon once more across his shoulders.

He was shouting but she could not hear his voice. She understood, however, that he was warning her—urging her to run for it while there was yet time. Together they made what speed they could across the space between them and the *morada,* no one so much as noticing that they had gone.

They were within the chapel, at the entrance to the dark passage opening on safety. Warren motioned to

Claire to descend first but she shook her head and bent to pull Dolores toward the trap-door in the hearth. The youth hesitated, then stepped quickly down the stone steps to where the tunnel led off horizontally. Laying his burden on the level floor he sprang back up the steps and caught the limp form of Dolores in his arms, taking her down in turn.

Claire stooped to enter the passage after him. As her foot found the top step there came a rending, smashing shock. The world seemed to burst apart into a million fiery particles. The girl's senses left her.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE RANGERS COME

CLAIRE opened her eyes on a calm, star-sprinkled sky, with the low moon at its edge. The storm had swept the earth leaving a trail of devastation in its wake—to disappear as quickly and mysteriously as it had arrived. The air, wiped clean by the storm's passing, was cool, with a bracing tang. There was no sound save the murmur of a stream close at hand.

The girl, recovering her senses slowly, raised herself to look about; but a sudden pain in her head and a quick nausea assailed her. She sank back dizzily, closing her eyes. She remembered the crash of the great landslide, her lapse into unconsciousness. But that had been in the *morada,* by the entrance to the hidden passage. Where was she now, she wondered? Where was Richard—and the others?

Once more, and cautiously this time, she raised her head from the rolled blanket on which it rested. She found that she was lying on the ground, in a canyon bed some yards from the stream whose voice she had been hearing. Across the stream black cliffs loomed; behind her the long rock walls were white in the moonlight. She did not recognize the spot, but she was out-

side the terrible valley, she was sure. She breathed a prayer of thanksgiving for that mercy.

She lifted her head a little higher, resting on one arm. Her roving glance settled on two figures not twenty feet distant. The first, which she knew instantly for the figure of Ramon was stretched by the stream's edge, face downward, his back bound with white cloths. His head was in his arms; he made no sound nor any motion save the occasional involuntary twitching of his shoulder muscles.

Beside him sat Dolores, leaning forward solicitously, a hand gently stroking the youth's hair. Her face was brooding—there was something in her eyes which checked the hail that trembled on Claire's lips. It seemed somehow a sacrilege to speak, to shorten by a breath that mood of troubled ecstasy. At times in days past Claire had thought Montoya's daughter cold, so quiet, so self-contained had been her mask. Now Claire saw her error; a deeply passionate spirit lay open to her sight. Dolores' soul was in the look she spent upon Ramon—and her soul's other name was love.

As Claire gazed, Ramon stirred suddenly—twisted round upon one side and glanced up at the girl bending over him. How, wounded as he was, he had survived the ordeal of the whip the watcher could not understand; but his look now seemed rational, and though he frowned with pain when he moved the fever had left him. Dolores too had been wounded, Claire recalled; she bore her left arm in a sling.

The youth's lips moved presently:

"I have made atonement to God, dear one, for my

sin against His holy commandments; yet it is in my mind that I have injured you more deeply than the Deity. Can you forgive me—set me a penance to fulfill?"

Dolores bent and kissed him with gentle ardor.

"Your love is all I ask, Ramon—so that I have that I am content! . . . The past is past; the future, if you will it so, is ours."

The boy grasped her hand tightly.

"I offer you a lifetime of atonement, *cara mia!*"

They were silent for a space, then once more Ramon's voice sounded questioningly:

"You have not yet told me how we came to be here, together—free to tell our love to one another. Was it that the brethren deemed the penance of the whip adequate—discharged me shriven of my guilt?"

Dolores' words came soothingly:

"Do not seek to know all now, Ramon—it is a tale for winter nights. Your penance was adequate, have no fear there; almost you paid your life for what was at the worst a venial sin. . . . Yet you must know this much, that without the aid of Ricardo Quintana——"

He broke in quickly:

"Do I remain that one's debtor?"

She nodded.

"Even so, Ramon. Without his aid we would not now be here together. We owe him much—we two and a third, the Señorita Innes!"

"Ah! the Señorita Innes!" His face clouded.

Claire's nervous laugh came in an awkward pause.

"Do not fear that I will plague you longer, Ramon!

It is a great joy to me that you perceive at length where your true happiness lies. . . . For I too have unearthed a hidden treasure, long lost but now regained. Let us cry quits—I wish you all good fortune!"

The youth stared at her, frowning. Not in a moment, his expression said, could he accept his late love in the rôle of friend.

He would have spoken, but at this moment a footstep sounded on the rocky trail above them; their eyes shifted in the direction of the sound. Claire's heart leaped as she saw Warren walking down the narrow gorge.

He came straight toward her, an anxious look on his tired face. But as his eyes met hers a fire sprang up in them that warmed her to the core.

"You're better—that's good! I hated to leave you, even for a moment; but I had to be sure there was no further danger from those within the valley."

Claire felt a foolish trembling in her limbs; the beating of her heart semed to stifle her.

"I—I don't know yet what happened," she stammered; "I was about to enter the passage when a crash came—I knew nothing more."

He smiled cheeringly, then spoke in a low voice so that the others could not hear. It was evident that he and Dolores had conspired to keep the details of his rescue from de Vargas.

"The slide hit us—or rather its forward fringe. It smashed the *morada* flat. You were struck on the head—a glancing blow luckily—and fell into the tun-

nel, where I caught you. I carried you and the others along the tunnel, one at a time. The passage ended in that cave there—," he waved a hand toward a dark opening in the cliff behind them. "I brought you out in the air and left you here while I reconnoitered."

"And you found?"

He shook his head sombrely.

"The valley was a death trap for the Penitentes. Some may have escaped through the pass that Pedro guarded—fled down the canyon here—but not many. We must wait for dawn to see."

He turned with brisk decision to the others.

"Ramon—and you too, Dolores—should have your hurts attended to. There are rangers coming, at any moment now. You must leave for Truchas when they arrive—if you can ride?"

The girl nodded. Ramon said, with a trace of stiffness:

"We can ride, Señor. . . . But first I have to thank you for what I am told you have done for me and for the Señorita Dolores, who will be my wife!"

Warren waved a deprecatory hand.

"Whatever I did—it was to save my own skin as much as yours. The Señorita Innes also was involved. . . . . Thank Dolores, if you must thank someone—it is her doing that any of us are here, alive to tell the tale of our adventures."

His face altered suddenly; he bent forward in an attitude of listening. From down the canyon came the sound of many hoofs, the chink of saddle harness.

"The rangers!" he exclaimed in a voice of relief.

Around the bend they came, a long file of bronzed men loping in single file, sitting their weary mounts as if grown to their seats. In the lead rode Moore, who waved a gauntleted arm and spoke to the posse behind him. The riders slowed to a trot, drew up by the waiting group and sprang from their horses.

Quickly Warren explained the situation.

"Leave me five men," he ended. "You and the rest take the wounded to town—see that they have every care till I get there!"

Moore seemed disappointed that the promised fight was denied him; yet he was glad that those he had ridden to succor were safe. He gave the needed orders to his men and helped Dolores and Ramon into their saddles.

He approached Claire.

"I've picked a gentle horse for you, Miss Innes—" he began; but the girl stopped him. She had risen and stood with flushed face and sparkling eyes, a picture of remonstrance.

"What! Must I leave when the danger is all past?"

"You must be done in, Claire!" said Warren. "Much better that you go with the others, get to bed as soon as you can!"

She turned on him indignantly.

"Not till you go! . . . I stay with you!"

He smiled, with a side glance at the ranger.

"A touch of fever, doubtless," he remarked; "we must not cross her!"

The valley at dawn presented a strange and terrible

sight. Choked level with the cliff walls at its upper end, the lower reaches where the last council of the Penitentes had been held were thickly strewn with stones thrown forward by the slide. The *morada* was obliterated, the altar and the site of the fire before it were completely buried; the row of wooden crosses beyond the stream had been swept away.

On the knoll before the chapel the litter was comparatively thin. Here, thrusting up from the jumble of broken rock and dirt could be descried an occasional stiff arm or leg, the dark patch of a cloak—grewsome clues to the crushed bones and flesh beneath.

To this spot Warren directed his men with orders to discover whether life remained in any of the buried clansmen. The youth's face was grave and set; in death his enemies had lost their former menace, they were pitiful relics merely—tokens of the invariable mortality of human creatures.

He glanced at Claire solicitously.

"Awful, isn't it?" He paused, staring at the blank spectacle of ruin. "I came here to fight the Penitentes—yet I would have failed but for the falling of the cross. Odd, when one thinks of it, that the symbol to which these zealots pinned their faith should in the end have overwhelmed the band!"

Claire's eyes moved northward to the peak. Where the cross had stood was a huge hole in the mountainside, ragged and deep as if gouged out by some titanic shovel.

"If one believed in miracles?" she murmured.

Her companion smiled grimly.

"Coincidence, rather, I imagine—though you will get no one in Truchas to believe that. It is the end of the order locally. This holocaust will be construed as a judgment on its members."

He ceased, glancing toward his men who were dragging a limp form from beneath a pile of rock.

"Wait for me here, please!" he said abruptly; "no need for you to watch the details of our work."

A moment later he was gazing down at the distorted visage of what had once been Don Tomaso Montoya. Soon the dead body of de Gama was unearthed. They found Juan's crushed corpse, a bullet through the heart. Body after body rewarded their search; in none was the spark of life apparent.

Claire watched them moodily from the boulder on which she had seated herself. Warren had told her that he would not stop long; that he would merely convince himself that none of the unfortunates remained alive, then ride in to town with her. She felt herself regretting now that she had not left with the others. The ghastly nature of the task under way appalled her. Her head throbbed dully, her limbs ached from exhaustion.

The need for water smote her presently. She rose and picked her way among the rocks, heading for the stream that strove protestingly to clear its channel of the débris that filled it. Halfway there she stopped suddenly, her heart throbbing painfully. She had heard a low moan—or dreamed that she had heard it—from the piled stones on her left.

For a moment panic threatened to overcome her;

she opened dry lips to summon help. Then at a recurrence of the moaning her fears left her abruptly. A survivor was here—a living soul in that wide area of ruin! With feverish haste she made her way to the spot whence the sound came.

Wedged cruelly between two great masses of rock was the figure of a man. The head and shoulders were free, though battered and covered with wounds and dried blood. The eyes were closed, the face deathly pale. Claire cried out involuntarily as she saw the face—knew the man for the missing priest, Father Felipe!

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### CLAIRE REGAINS FAITH

CLAIRE leaned forward quickly and called the priest's name. He did not respond to her voice; he was unconscious, she perceived. Only the low moaning came at intervals from bloodless lips.

The girl straightened and glanced round her wildly. Warren, who had heard her cry, was running toward her, making what speed he could over the uneven ground. She dashed to the nearby stream, returning with a strip from her skirt soaked in water.

She found the agent waiting for her, gazing down compassionately at the senseless man.

"Can we do nothing?" she asked breathlessly. "Your men—can they not extricate him?"

The youth shook his head.

"Twice our combined strength would fail to move those stones. There is nothing we can do, Claire—nothing at all!"

She was laving the priest's face, squeezing water from her cloth onto his forehead. As she gazed, hoping against hope for a further sign of life, the moaning ceased. His lips tightened, his nostrils widened at a deep indrawn breath; his eyes slowly opened.

"Oh, Father!" sobbed Claire. "If we could only help you!"

Comprehension came into his eyes; a gentle smile shadowed his lips.

"The body is beyond help, Señorita—yet for your comfort, know that I feel nothing of pain." He paused, fighting for breath, then said: "If you would ease my mind, tell me what others besides yourselves escaped the wrath of God's destroying angel?"

Quickly Warren told of the saving of Dolores and Ramon—told also of the dead bodies they had found.

"We four—and yourself, Father—are all who live, I fear!"

The old priest stared a moment as if unseeingly; then his dim eyes sought Claire's.

"I have long loved Ramon—as a son, Señorita; the son my office of a priest has otherwise denied me. Forgive me, therefore, when I say to you: do not tempt him more! His heart, for all its straying lately, is Dolores'—who loves him, as I think. . . . Bring them together—you will be well rewarded!"

"Dolores and Ramon have made their peace, Father!" replied the girl softly. "And I—I have my reward already. I have rewon the man I have long loved—the man who stands beside me."

Joy lit the seamed face of the dying man. His eyes turned gratefully toward the sky. His voice rang out stronger as he cried:

"Glory to God, who has blessed me at the last! My prayers are answered—I go to Him, the Merciful!"

His face grew gray, his eyes dimmed quickly. Claire's sight failed in a mist of tears.

"It is the end," said her companion softly.

As they rode homeward down Gallinas Canyon it was plain Claire must pay dearly for her obstinate resolve to keep up to the last. She leaned forward, swaying in the saddle, her hand tightly clutching the horn. The color had left her cheeks, her eyes were sunken with dark circles beneath them. When they reached the ridge on which stood Hilltop Station—the late camp of one Ricardo Quintana—it was obvious that she could go no further without rest.

"We'll stop here," said her companion with curt decision. "No one's about—the rain of last night kills fire danger for the time being. There ought to be food in the cabin; I'll get a fire going and fix up a snack!"

A little later Claire sat down to a meal of coffee and hot biscuits, beans and bacon. She ate ravenously; never, she thought, had food tasted half so good. Life revived in her. Her spirits rose miraculously. Lingering traces of the past day and night of terror vanished as morning mist dissolves.

Afterward she sat leaning against a giant pine, staring at the wide forest before her with contented eyes. Her companion was seated cross-legged opposite, smoking with every evidence of pleasure. His back was to the view, his eyes on the girl's face.

"After the storm—calm!" he said presently—perhaps merely to capture her wandering attention.

Her eyes swung to his slowly; she smiled. Then her smile faded, and she said gravely:

"There is something I must tell you, Dick—something not very nice, I'm afraid. But first, there is much that puzzles me about your being here. I want to know how and why you came to Truchas—everything!"

He frowned, pressing the red end of his cigarette against his boot till it grew black.

"Can't that wait, Claire? Can't we just enjoy—this, for the moment?"

He waved a hand at the peaceful scene about; but she shook her head.

"I'd rather get things cleared up, first!"

He drew a deep breath and plunged, since he must, into his recital. It was a glamorous yarn he spun for her, a tale of danger and constant effort, of passion and occasional stark tragedy. He spared details, touching the salient features of the history only; yet he began at the beginning and went through to the end.

It began at his mother's death, when he had gone to Mexico as representative of a mining company—having despaired by this time of Claire's love. He told how his duties, routine at first, led him later to take sides in a brewing revolution; how in this work he had crossed the trail of the Penitentes, saving the life of their Chief—whose confidence and ultimate support he won.

"But it was not all plain sailing," he said at this point; "there was a faction against me—de Gama and his followers. The Head was old, de Gama aspired to succeed him. Yet I held my own while the Chief

lived. When he died, suddenly, it was another story. My enemies got control, plotted to put me out of the way. I got wind of the plan and escaped, taking with me most of the secrets of the order and a valuable token—a white stone cross the Head wore, and which they set great store by. This I took partly in revenge on my would-be murderers—partly because I thought it might be useful at some future time."

"And was it?" his auditor asked as he paused.

"You shall judge in the sequel!" he smiled.

He told of his years of hiding from the emissaries of the Penitentes—a story in itself; how, during this period, he worked, disguised, as an agent for the Government, tracing gun-runners and suspected revolutionists who lived on blackmail wrung from reluctant American concessionaires. Then came the killing of his friend Holt in Truchas, when a use for the white stone occurred to him. He had come to the wild mountain town for the purpose of revenge; to secure proof of the crime, capture the guilty, and stamp out, if he could, the local organization of the order he so hated.

His plan was to pose, when the opportune moment arrived, as the High Preceptor himself, trusting that news of the new Head—or details of his personality—might not have filtered here before him. He had been able to form an alliance, of a sort, with Father Felipe, who he learned was at heart antipathetic to the Penitente band. He had hoped for aid from Ramon also, but that hoped-for assistance circumstances had prevented him from enlisting.

"My scheme, you see," he said; "was in some re-

spects vague, depending on what turned up for the next day's move. De Gama's coming spoiled everything—I would have failed in the end, as you know, had not the landslide happened in the nick of time!"

"Yet you did not fail," she said musingly. "Perhaps, as Father Felipe thought, his prayers were more effective than all your plans and efforts!"

"Perhaps," he said soberly. "Who knows?"

She was staring out at the tapestry of waving trees, her face thoughtful, her eyes meditative. Suddenly she turned to her companion, searched his face keenly. It was evident that she was nerving herself for some new passage that to her seemed critical.

"Tell me," she said; "during all this time, through all these terrible events—you loved me, Dick?"

The youth's face flushed.

"No credit to me," he answered with grim candor; "I couldn't help it. Most of the time, I—I wanted to hate you, Claire. I tried to, but I couldn't. And—yes, I loved you, always!"

Her eyes widened. Her lips were trembling, though she smiled.

"Even when you came here and saw me—flirting with Ramon?"

"Flirting?"

"No—not flirting; you are right. I really loved him—in one way. Call it infatuation, if you will—that comes nearest, I think, to the truth. . . . Yet while it lasted it was strong. Did you know that I offered to leave Truchas with Ramon—though he refused the offer when he learned that I was married?"

It was out—that which she had sworn to tell Richard ere their love was sealed by mutual trust. She stared at him with a still face, with apprehensive eyes.

The expression of his face did not alter. He gazed back at her with an uncanny calm, no sign of his mind's workings visible.

"Can you forgive me, Dick?" she faltered. "Can you still love me?"

He nodded slowly.

"It is forgiven, Claire—and I still love you. . . . What will you say, though, when I tell you that there was no bar, as you thought, between you and Ramon? Had you known what I knew all the time, you might have gone with him safely—without sin . . . . You might have married him!"

Blank wonder marked her features.

"What? What do you say? . . . I might have married him?"

He was frowning anxiously; small beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. His turn it was for explanation.

"There was no thought of myself in what I did, believe me—it was for you I kept silence when I might have spoken: I thought it was best for you——"

"But what—how could I have married when I already have a husband, when I am joined by the Church to one I hate, till death do us part?"

His eyes were steady, though he spoke through stiff lips:

"Hate him no longer, Claire—for he no longer lives to trouble you. . . . You are free!"

She stared still, unable it seemed to realize the thing he said. He went on quietly:

"It is true. I saw the news of Vinton Walsh's sudden death a week after you came. It was in a paper of Moore's—I destroyed the sheet, dreading lest the fact reach you. . . . You see, I knew by then of your infatuation for Ramon. Did I do wrong, Claire?"

She rose unsteadily and moved toward him. She looked deep in his eyes, solemnly grateful that her heart had found an anchorage no storm could loosen; that the white ship of her long dreamed-of happiness had sailed into its haven smoothly at the last.

The answer that she gave her lover was not couched in words, yet it appeared to satisfy him.

A little later she strove to escape the coil of his restraining arms.

"I've just remembered," she cried with a smile—her old smile, radiant and touched with elfishness; "I must go to Isabel. I have that to tell her which will gladden her. I had lost faith, Dick—I have regained it!"

"Faith?" he asked vaguely.

She nodded without smiling now.

"Faith in human love and human loyalty. For without faith in these, faith in a God of mercy is unthinkable!"

THE END